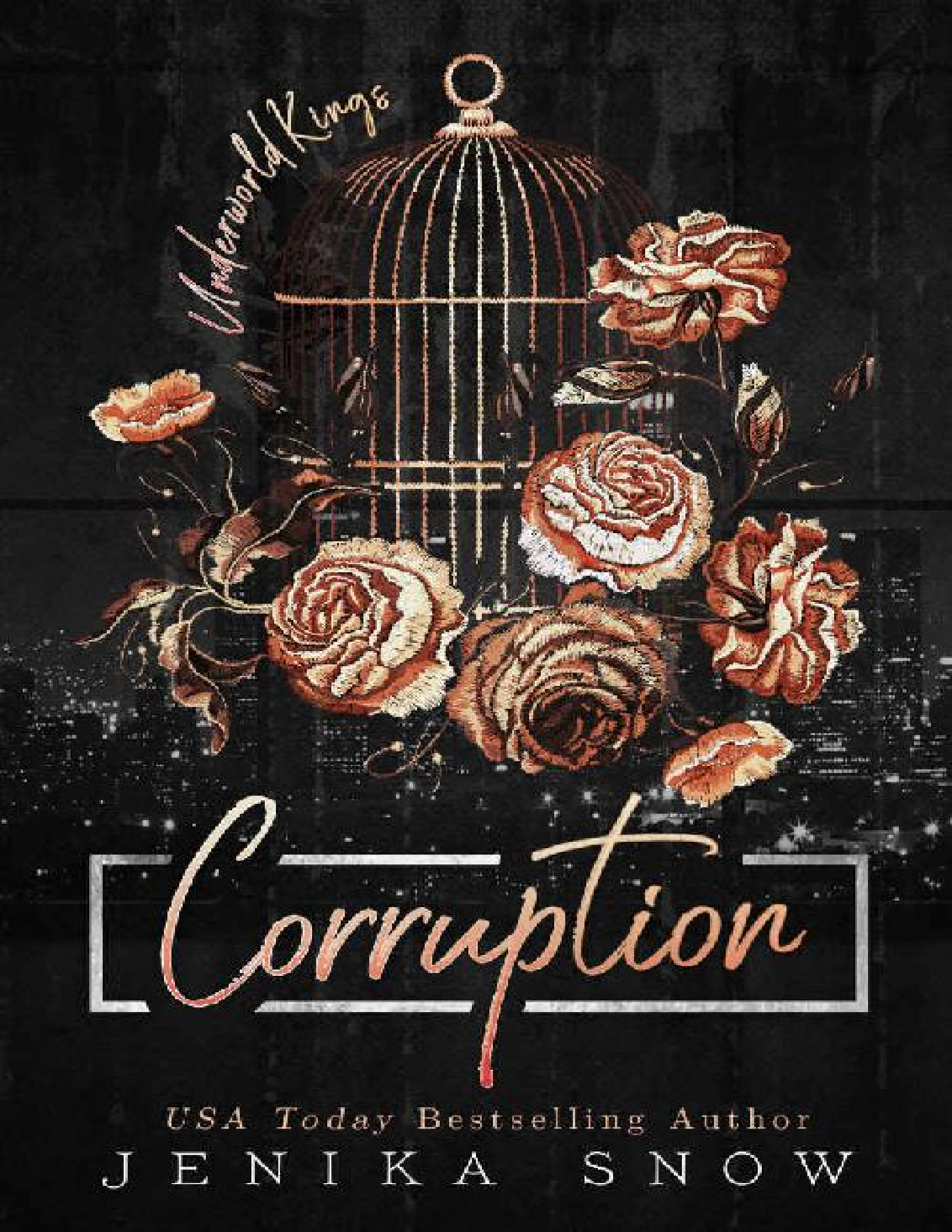
Underworld Kings
Corruption
USA Today Bestselling Author
JENIKA SNOW

CORRUPTION

UNDERWORLD KINGS

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CORRUPTION (Underworld Kings)

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About the Author

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Even the beast could get the beauty… he just had to take her.

Anastasia was a Russian mafia princess.

I was unworthy to even look at her.

But that didn’t stop a bond, a friendship to form between us. She was the only good and right thing in my painful, brutal life. She was the only one who could look at my bruises and wounds and see I wasn’t a total waste of space.

But I was ripped away from her, thrust into the underground world of violence and fighting, molded and shaped to be the ultimate killing machine for the Bratva.

And that’s who I was now.

Razoreniye. Ruin.

Now, ten years later, all of humanity had been stripped from me, all the emotion and empathy that I’d once felt taken away until I was nothing more than the beast who craved blood and had far too many kills tallied up.

But they could never take her away from me. And so I followed her, watched her through her bedroom window, broke into her apartment, and held her as she slept.

I wasn’t a good man. I was carved out from the very devil himself, and although I would never be good enough for Anastasia, that didn’t mean I’d ever let anyone else have her.

So when she was forced to marry another, I did the only thing that made sense.

I took her in the middle of the night and kept her locked up until she realized she was mine and mine alone.

NOTE: For a list of CW/TW, please visit **HERE**

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PREFACE

There once was a girl I knew with hair the color of a raven’s wings, eyes the shade of warm whiskey, and freckles across the bridge of her nose that I’d count and instantly feel calm.

I’d tell her they reminded me of the stars. She’d laugh, and it was the greatest sound I’d ever heard. It was soft, like tiny birds chirping in a nest as they waited for their mother to feed them.

I still remembered the way she smelled, like the wisteria around her father’s home when they first bloomed in the spring, bursts of sweetness that tinged the air so you couldn’t escape. You didn’t want to.

I could remember so many things about her. How she looked at me when she didn’t think I noticed. How her laugh was the most beautiful thing I’d ever heard, and how I’d hold on to that as I lay beaten and bloody in my room after my father beat the shit out of me.

She brought this life and light into my soul that I was too selfish to give up.

And then it was all taken away, a happiness I’d never again experience. Just taken from me in the most brutal, painful way like it meant nothing. Like I meant nothing.

Those were the things I thought about when I closed my eyes and lay on the floor, blood that wasn’t my own covering me, my knuckles raw and cut open because that was all I was good for.

To deliver pain and hurt and all the violence a human could give.

I may have lost my heart long ago. I may no longer have my humanity, or remember the sweet whispering of what happiness tasted like. But even still, I thought of her and those memories when I closed my eyes.

They could never take them away from me.

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THEN

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CHAPTER

ONE

Anastasia

"My father will scold me if he finds out," I whispered and stared with wide eyes at Kostya.

"Your father won't do anything but give you a scowl and a tap on the back of your hand," he said softly, mischief in his voice.

Kostya had this little grin on his face and I couldn't help but return it.

"You know how spoiled you are," he whispered and nudged me forward. "No one will care that you took it. Besides, if you get caught I'll take the blame." There was a strange softening in his eyes that made my heart do funny things.

I knew he'd take the fall if I got caught. He'd done it more than once, against my wishes, but Kostya was protective of me. And I of him.

Oh, God, this would be the worst thing I'd ever done, and honestly it wasn't even that bad.

"Come on, *milaya moyna*." I looked at Kostya and felt this flutter in my belly every time he said that endearment. *My sweet.*

He gave me a wink and looked back at the entrance to the kitchen. I followed his line of sight, smelling the baked goods being prepared for dinner tonight.

"Maybe if you just ask Saskia, she'll give us some treats." That mischief glinted in Kostya's eyes and he shook his head.

"*Milaya moyna*, Saskia keeps her baked goodies locked up tighter than her—"

“—don’t even go there.” I cut him off and held up a hand. “I don’t even want to think about that.”

He was chuckling before I even finished speaking.

“One pie for you and one for me.”

I scrunched up my nose, stalling.

“Kostya, I don’t even need a whole pie.”

He puffed out his chest and looked down at me. “I do. Look at how much bigger I am than you. Do you think one slice is going to be enough?”

I made a very unladylike sound but didn’t bother responding. Kostya knew he was massive. He was two years older than me, and even at the tender age of fifteen, he was double the size of boys his age.

So when he said he could eat an entire pie by himself, he wasn’t exaggerating.

I pulled on my bottom lip with my teeth as I looked around the corner into the kitchen. I could see Saskia moving back and forth, our robust cook “imported from Russia,” as my father had said, “because nothing in the States tastes as good or as authentic as stuff back in the old country.”

Saskia had a rather rough-around-the-edges personality, but if she cared about you then it was like heaven came down and blessed you personally. And if you pissed her off? Well, she could flay the skin off of your bones just with a few choice Russian words.

“And why don’t you just do it?” I whispered and glanced at Kostya again. The grin he gave me was extra mischievous this time.

“You and I both know you like the rush of adrenaline and excitement breaking the rules gives.” He shrugged his broad shoulders. “But I don’t mind going in there and snagging a few pies.” As if to make his point, his stomach growled and he placed a big hand on his abdomen and patted it. “Clock’s ticking, princess.”

I internally groaned. He was right. Although I didn’t like getting in trouble, I couldn’t deny that the rush of the prospect of getting caught was an excitement unlike anything I’d ever experienced before.

“How did I know I’d find you here trying to sneak some of Saskia’s treats?”

I recognized the thickly accented voice that came from behind us. We both turned, and I didn’t miss how Kostya moved a step closer to me as we faced Timur, my father’s right-hand man.

Timur’s lips twitched as he noticed how protective Kostya was, and I wanted to remind Kostya that Timur was like an uncle to me. I’d grown up around him, and he’d always been a stable presence in my life.

For a moment we all just stood there in silence, Timur focusing back on me, his expression softening.

“We weren’t doing anything,” Kostya said with hostility in his voice.

I glanced over at him with my brows pulled down and feeling confused. I didn’t understand why he seemed upset all of a sudden.

“Go on. I’ll look the other way. Your secret stays with me.” He gave me a wink before sliding his gaze back to Kostya, all friendly demeanor he’d given me completely vanishing at the snap of a finger.

And then he was gone, turning and moving down the hall and out of sight. But I could still feel the tension coming from Kostya.

“What’s wrong?” He didn’t answer, just shook his head. But I could see on his expression that there was something wrong. “Why did you act like that toward Timur?”

“Sorry,” he finally said. “It’s just one of those days with my father, so I’m on edge.”

I felt my heart hurt at hearing that. I knew Kostya’s father was a bastard, but I didn’t ask him about it because I knew he wouldn’t want to talk to me about the topic. I’d tried before and he had closed off far too quickly that I’d taken the hint.

I let everything else go and smiled, glancing back into the kitchen and wanting to change the subject if it put Kostya at ease. And so I rounded the corner and stole those pies.

TWENTY MINUTES later we were hiding behind the pool house, fingers covered in sticky pie filling and the sound of Saskia yelling in the distance carrying in the wind.

Saskia cursed in Russian and Kostya chuckled. “She’s so pissed.”

I grinned and nudged my shoulder against his. “She’s gonna be on a warpath for the next few days thanks to us.”

We were silent for a moment before I finally broke it up by asking, “Will you come watch me dance tomorrow?” I glanced over at

Kostya. He was staring off into the distance, this weird look on his face before he masked it and looked at me.

"I can't, *milaya moyna*." There was this strange tone in his voice that had me straightening my back. "I have to help my father fix something on the East end of the grounds." He cleared his throat and looked away, but I heard the disappointment in his voice.

I knew my expression probably mirrored that. And then sorrow filled its place because I hated that he had to be anywhere near his father.

Artur didn't see Kostya as anything but offspring he wished had never come to fruition. And God did that break my heart. How could anyone not see how much light Kostya had, how sweet and gentle he was despite his size? How he'd sacrifice everything for the ones he cared about?

I looked off into the distance and lifted a hand to my throat as I thought about last week when I saw Artur berating Kostya right before he backhanded him hard enough his bottom lip had split open. I closed my eyes and felt tears prick behind them.

"No tears, my soft-hearted girl."

I felt my throat tighten and nodded even though I wasn't looking at him.

"I'll come by tonight, though?" His tone softened and that strange tingling in my belly came back full-force. Once again, he changed the subject to comfort me.

If my father found out Kostya was sneaking in through my bedroom window to sleep in my bed, stealing pies would be the least of our worries. It wouldn't matter if we were just friends, best friends… soulmates.

Although Kostya never talked about it with me, never confided in me about the darkness that consumed him, I knew his home life was bad, as it was with so many families within the Bratva.

But I felt and saw that ugliness when he couldn't hold the mask long enough, when I'd seen it slip and fall before he put it back in place. I'd feel it in the tightness of his body when he'd slip into my bed and curl his big form around mine.

And I wished like hell I could take that pain from him, wished I could wrap him up and protect him from the ugliness that was so prevalent in our world and lives.

So I didn't say anything in return, just rested my head on his shoulder as we both sat there in silence, staring off into the grounds and eating those stolen pies.

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CHAPTER

TWO

Anastasia

Ballet was a very integral part of my life, and even more so for my Russian family. My mother had been a renowned dancer in Russia, and although I knew my father had seen her dance before, their marriage had been arranged.

So it was only natural for me to also follow in her footsteps.

I spent the last thirteen years of my life immersed in ballet. I ate, slept, *and breathed* it. My toes bled, blisters formed, and more times than not my entire body ached to the point when I crawled in bed at night, it was with tears streaming down my cheeks.

But despite the pain and sometimes frustration, if I didn't have ballet I wouldn't be *me*.

I finished off my set with the flourished arabesque, my eyes still shut, but the sound of the crowd's pleasure over the performance brought a small smile to my lips.

I still heard the crowd clapping as I exited the stage. After the curtain call and changing, I met with my family out in the lobby. And once again, despite knowing he wouldn't be here, I searched for Kostya.

Although he didn't come to many of my performances, he always did try, much to my father's disapproval. Then again he was the son of a foot soldier, which meant, in my father's eyes, not good enough for me.

But we'd grown up together, and I couldn't picture my life without him. In fact, I knew it would be a bleak and gray world if I didn't have my Viking-sized best friend by my side.

My father was in a heated discussion with Timur, whom I knew my father trusted with his life and who went everywhere with us.

I stopped beside my mother and Timur glanced at me, giving me that sweet smile that told me he was proud. My mother, dressed to the nines with dripping jewels around her throat and at her ears, looked like she'd rather be anywhere else but here.

My father clipped out a harsh string of Russian to Timur and jerked his chin toward the front doors. Then my father walked over to where we stood and cupped each side of my face before leaning down and kissing the center of my forehead.

"Beautiful," he murmured in Russian. *"Absolutely beautiful, my little doll."* He pulled me into a tight embrace, the scent of his expensive cologne and some other smoky aroma that always lingered with him filling my head and sparking memories in my brain.

When he moved back, he pulled out my necklace he always kept for me for safekeeping when I wasn't able to wear it. Once it was secured around my neck, he kissed my cheek and beamed down at me.

I was a daddy's girl, if I were to put a term to it. Where my mother lacked love and affection, my father gave it to me tenfold. And I relished it, knowing I wouldn't find parental love anywhere else.

Although my father was overprotective, and very overbearing, the iron fist he wielded in the Bratva never touched me.

Despite the love and affection he lavished on me, I wasn't a fool to think the world we lived in, the crime syndicate that ran through my blood, wouldn't one day catch up with me. It always did with those involved in this life.

My father offered his arm to my mother, and she slipped her hand in the crook of his elbow. I stood at his other side, and the three of us silently made our way out of the venue and to the waiting car at the curb.

Once we were in the interior, the driver took us back home. My parents were as silent as they ever were in each other's company. The love between them had been gone for as long as I could remember.

I loved my family, as much as someone could care about the familiar. But as I glanced at my mother and father, who acted as if looking in each other's direction would cause bodily harm, I wondered what, exactly, love felt like because it surely couldn't be this.

It was only ten minutes into the car ride before they started arguing with each other. I tuned them out as soon as my mother started talking about how she was going away this weekend for a girls' trip to Bermuda.

Once we were back home, I quickly said goodnight and headed to my room. I shut the door and leaned against it as I stared at the ceiling. I lived in wealth, my surroundings were lavish, and I knew if I didn't have Kostya in my life I probably would've felt like I was in a whirlpool. Just going round and round and round with no chance of getting out from the repetitive motion.

After getting ready for bed, I shut off all the lights, laying in bed with the blankets pulled up to my chin, and stared at the patio doors in my bedroom.

Kostya wouldn't come until much later. He'd wait till everyone was asleep, until he knew he could get past the guards and security cameras. He was good like that, stealthy and sneaky.

It brought a smile to my face and I felt my eyes grow heavy as sleep tried to claim me. Even though I wanted to stay awake and watch him come into my room, I was exhausted and let the feeling of falling asleep take over.

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CHAPTER

THREE

Kostya

When I could barely stand, they pushed me harder.

When I was broken, bloody, bruised and begging to stop, they made me do more, fight harder.

I turned my head and spit a mouthful of saliva and blood out, weaving on my feet, my entire body aching. I was pretty sure one of my shoulders was dislocated, possibly a rib cracked.

Although I was big for my age, bigger than even the majority of the fully grown men currently crammed in the underground room, the opponent they'd given me tonight was far bigger. Older. More experienced in death.

He came at me and I ducked, swung, and hit him in the kidneys. The grunt that left him was satisfactory, and I did it again. He slammed his fist into my side and the breath left me as I stumbled back.

"Worthless," my father roared. *"Kostya, get your fucking ass up and fight him. Use your training. Take him down."* His Russian was slurred, not just from him drinking all night, but from the buzzing in my head.

I had a cut on my temple, blood trailing down my forehead and obscuring my vision. And then he was charging toward me again, his anger and size making his movements sloppy, slower. I breathed out slowly, put all my energy into focusing, and knew I needed to finish this.

I only had one priority in mind, one vision that played through my brain. I wanted to be with Ana. I wanted to hold her, to feel her in my arms

because that was the only time I ever felt like anything was okay.

In the background, I could hear my father shouting harsh, crude words in Russian, ones you didn't speak to your son. But then again that was not how he saw me. I was a commodity, a tool, a weapon he could use.

I moved left, right, did rapid-fire hits to my opponent's solar plexus until he stumbled back and landed on his ass. And then I was on him, brought my knee up and connected right under his jaw, hearing a sickening crack as his head jerked back and he fell to the floor.

Despite tonight being more about training than an actual competition, the men who were watching started making sounds of approval and exchanging money. I stumbled back until the wall stopped my retreat, my hands flat on the cold cinder block. The only thing I smelled was thick, coppery blood.

My father came up to me, a lumbering beast with a pronounced brow and dark eyes as he stared at me.

"What the fuck was that?" he said in Russian. Or maybe it was English.

I couldn't think or hear clearly enough to decipher what language he spoke.

His words jumbled together and I blinked rapidly. I'd, been hit numerous times in the head. Maybe my brain had finally given out as his visage wavered, doubled.

"You should've been able to take him down right away." His nostrils flared as he looked to the side when one of his associates came to speak to him. With a brisk nod, he looked back at me, tipped his chin toward the back hall, and said, *"Go home. We do this all over again in two days' time. And you better fucking work on your moves before then."*

I didn't speak. I knew better. If I ran my mouth, all that would do was anger my father even more and cause blows to rain down on me. He stared at me for long seconds, his eyes bloodshot, red-rimmed, and the stench of sweat and booze spilling from him.

"*This training isn't working*." He narrowed his eyes. "*It's time we go to phase two. Things need to be more extensive. You need to be immersed. It's time*."

My heart raced before plummeting. I knew this day was coming. *But, God, this soon?* I opened my mouth but promptly shut it when my father's nostrils flared again. He wanted me to step out of line. He wanted to have a reason right now to hurt me.

My father turned away and made his way back into the crowd. I rested the back of my head on the wall, closed my eyes, and gave myself just a moment before pushing off and stalking away from the gore and violence and back to the only gentle, soft thing in my fucked-up world.

Anastasia.

GETTING past the security guards of Anastasia's home had gotten easier for me over the years. It also helped that I knew the inner workings, was friendly with the men who patrolled, persuaded some to look the other way, or just outright bought them off.

I climbed the side of the house, gripping the lattice that led up to her window, the wisteria that wound its way through the framework causing bursts of flowery scents all around me.

It was an aroma I'd forever associate with my girl.

Once on her balcony, I opened the French doors and slipped into her bedroom. I'd made a quick stop home to change, shower, and bandage up the worst of my wounds, because the last thing I wanted Anastasia to see was me all fucked up.

I stood there a moment and exhaled. The feeling that always surrounded me when I was with her, one I couldn't ever describe, filled me inexplicably.

It was as if I were breathing for the first time, feeling my heart beat for the first time. It was as if until this moment I hadn't been living.

Strong words, powerful ones. But the truth nonetheless.

I shut the doors softly behind me, and she stirred slightly but didn't wake. I toed off my shoes and made my way to the bed, pulling the blanket aside so that I could slip in behind her.

Instantly she faced me, but her eyes stayed closed, a small miracle because I didn't want her to see my face. It was so bruised and bloodied that I'd terrify her.

I squeezed my eyes shut at that thought because it wouldn't matter. I knew what my father had meant. I knew what they planned on doing, what they planned on taking from me. So I wrapped my arms around her and held her tightly, knowing this was going to be the last time I did it.

“You are the only good thing in my life, the only thing that makes sense.” I kept my voice soft, murmuring against the crown of her head.

She mumbled softly but otherwise stayed asleep, her hands on my chest, instinctively knowing I was her protector.

“And not having you guts me, *milaya moyna*. It’s already the worst pain imaginable.” My throat tightened. “It already hurts so bad and I have you in my arms.”

I reached into my pants pocket and pulled out the locket I’d gotten for her. I knew the day would come when I’d have to leave her, when they’d force me further into the underground. I’d been hanging on to the necklace for so long now. I wanted to give her something to remember me by.

I lifted the silver chain up, and the circular locket swung back and forth for a moment before settling. There weren’t any pictures of me aside from one she’d secretly snapped of me last summer. She’d shown it to me a few days later after she got it printed, and as much as I hated the way I looked, all long limbs and oversized height that made me feel like a freak, I didn’t ask her to get rid of it.

I hoped she put it in the locket right next to a picture of herself. That way we would always be together.

For as many times as I’d been beaten, hurt, kicked when I was down, I’d never cried. I’d never shed a tear.

But right now, as I set the locket on her bedside table and pulled her in close, I cried for the first time in my life because this was the last time I’d see her.

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NOW

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CHAPTER

FOUR

Anastasia

Ten years later

I’d heard people say the pain gets better as time passes. It doesn’t disappear, but it does fade. I called that bullshit. I didn’t know who these people were, or what kind of hurt they experienced, but I still felt that hard stab in the center of my chest as if it were ten years ago.

It was funny to be able to feel like you were alone despite being in a room full of people. To feel as if nobody really saw you, heard you, or knew you despite them congratulating you on your accomplishments, and telling you what a beautiful dancer you were.

That’s where I was right now.

And I’d felt like that for the past decade, when my entire world tipped on its axis. When everything I thought was good and right turned out to be rotten and broken.

I kept my faux smile in place, one I had perfected over the years. It was a mask, easily put up as much as I could take it down when I was alone, when I wouldn’t be judged for not keeping appearances.

After the obligatory time I was required to spend bumping shoulders with everyone, I excused myself and went into the dressing room, sealing myself in and finally taking the first real breath of the night.

Costumes were strewn all over the place. The vanity was covered in makeup and brushes, bobby pins and jewels, trinkets to go in your hair to

catch the light and sparkle.

All fake. All part of an elaborate act, the illusion of beauty and perfection.

I used to love dancing, as if ballet was ingrained in me, so rooted in my core that without it there was no me. But something shifted in me after Kostya left.

And as the years passed, as I still immersed myself in pointe and rose in the ranks, finally becoming principal dancer—one of the youngest in the world, too—I realized this wasn't who I was. Not anymore.

After Kostya left I'd used dancing to fill a void in me that just couldn't be filled. It was this aching hole in my gut that was a never-ending hurt. And dancing gave me an outlet, a distraction—that was, until the quiet moments when I was alone and my thoughts and emotions consumed me.

I thought maybe I felt like this because I was lonely, but the platonic dates I'd forced myself to go on had done nothing to ease anything. Time with friends was a nice bandage, but one that was easily ripped off.

I closed my eyes and thought about Kostya, as I did… all the time. Even a decade later, he was always on my mind.

Where was he? What was he doing right now? Did he even think about me, miss me, regret not even saying goodbye? Was he even alive?

But I'd get no answers. I didn't back then and I certainly wouldn't now.

*"*DOROGAYA MOYA*, Kostya and his father were relocated."*

I felt myself crying and hated it. I lifted my hand and gripped the necklace I'd found on my bedside table, the one that I knew Kostya had left for me. It wasn't one that screamed money. It wasn't flashy or even gold. But it was the most precious possession I had, and it was because I knew he'd left it as his goodbye.

It pissed me off and broke my heart.

My father glanced at what I held. "What's that?"

I shook my head. "A gift. From Kostya." I tightened my hold on it, afraid he'd take it away. But he just exhaled and gave me an empathetic look. "I have to assume it was his way of saying goodbye." More tears spilled down my cheeks. I'd put our pictures inside that very morning, excited to show him, but then realizing I wouldn't see him again.

I could feel Timur watching us from the corner, but I felt zero shame or embarrassment that I'd busted into my father's office while he'd been in a meeting with Timur. I didn't care who saw me breaking down over Kostya leaving.

"It was out of my hands. Orders came from Moscow."

I angrily swiped at my cheeks, brushing away the tears. "Why didn't you tell them his family was needed here?"

"Sweetheart," my father said with anguish in his voice as he stood and walked around his desk to envelop me. "You know that's not how it works," he murmured against the crown of my head. "I might have power, but there are those more powerful than even me, and I can't go against orders."

I buried my face against his chest and cried. "He didn't even say goodbye. He's just… gone."

"Shhh, it's okay, dorogaya moya*. Everything will be okay. You'll see."*

But I knew it wouldn't be okay. Nothing ever would. It felt like someone had just ripped my chest open and scooped my heart out with a spoon.

"Please," I said and clasped my hands in front of me, pressing them to the center of my chest. "There has to be something you can do? There has to be someone you can speak to and find out what happened or where he went?"

My father gave me a sympathetic look and shook his head. I didn't know why I glanced at Timur again, maybe to see if he'd give me some kind of reassurance, but he looked absolutely gutted and as helpless as I felt.

I exhaled when the silence got too tight around me, when it was clear the conversation was over between myself and my father.

I left his office and walked only a few steps down the hall. I could hear my mother laughing followed by the deep rumble of her guard's voice as he said something that had her giggling all over again.

I leaned back against the wall and rested my head on the overly expensive damask wallpaper my mother insisted on having put up in this part of the house, one I wanted to rip off with my bare hands. I closed my eyes for a moment and told myself I had to be stronger.

But I'd never felt this weak before, and it was almost crippling in its intensity.

A second later I heard my father's office door open and close, then heard footsteps come closer. Only when I felt someone standing in front of me did I open my eyes and look at Timur.

His expression was sympathetic and I curled my hands in tight fists, hating that anybody felt sorry for me. But then again I brought this on myself by breaking down in front of so many people, it seemed.

"I feel so stupid for asking him when I knew there wasn't anything my father could do."

There was a strange expression that crossed his face as he looked at my father's closed office doors. His throat moved as he swallowed, and then a muscle ticked under his jaw.

"Some things are out of our hands." He exhaled and for the first time I saw Timur's ironclad aura fade slightly. "And not having control is painful. It's hard walking the earth knowing there's so much you want to say and do, yet you can't."

He looked at me then and shoved his hands in the pockets of his suit jacket.

"I know pain. I know loss. And I wish there were things that I could change in my life, but sometimes we have to take the little bit of strength we have left, plant it deep within ourselves, care for it, and hope and pray like hell that it grows."

His words were poetic and wholly strange. I'd never heard Timur sound so deep before.

"I really am sorry, Anastasia. I wish there was something I could do because seeing you so sad breaks my heart."

I straightened from the wall and gave him a smile, although it felt forced. "Thank you, Timur. I know you and Kostya didn't really have a close relationship, but he meant everything to me." I looked down at the floor, squeezing my eyes shut as a tear slid down my cheek. "This is the hardest thing I've ever had to deal with." A second later I felt Timur brush his thumb across my cheek.

I was so startled that I snapped my head up and took an involuntary step back. He gave me another sad smile and shook his head.

"I really do hate to see you upset. If there was something I could do, I would, you know that. And I know if there was something Vladimir could do, he would as well." And then he turned and headed back to my father's office.

Once the door was closed, I lifted my hand and wiped my cheek, not just smoothing away the tears, but also his touch. It wasn't that I felt uncomfortable, but right now I almost wanted to be invisible.

I didn't want people to feel sorry for me. I didn't even want to feel sorry for myself. Maybe I should just let the anger out so I could move on?

THAT MEMORY PLAYED through my mind over and over again. In the beginning, I'd been so obsessed with finding out any kind of truth that it was all I cared about, all I thought about. I ended up asking everyone, praying like hell someone could tell me anything.

The staff, guards, and even continuously pestering my father for more details, hoping there was something he missed and had forgotten to tell me. But it was always the same, with him telling me he didn't know anything else. And I'd cried as my father held me close and told me he was sorry, that he hated to see me upset and wished he could take the pain away.

I pushed away from the door and made my way over to the rack of clothes to change into. And as if on cue, as if my parents knew exactly when I was free to answer their call, my cell vibrated.

After finding my purse and getting my cell phone out, I saw the text from my father.

Papa: Are you still up for dinner tonight?

I'll be there with bells on.

I laughed at my own lame response, but I knew my father liked it when I was being quirky.

Papa: Keep that enthusiasm when you get here. Your mother's had three bottles of wine brought up from the cellar and already finished off one.

I internally groaned at the idea of having to sit through a meal with my mother, who made drinking wine look like an Olympic sport, and if it was, she'd be the reigning gold medalist.

I sent another quick text to my father letting him know I'd be there within the hour, but then just stood there and stared at my reflection, wondering for the hundredth time, how I got from point A to B without losing my mind.

TWO HOURS later I was standing in my parents' sitting room watching as my mother finished off the second bottle of wine.

My father had taken a call just moments before and I could hear his deep voice coming through the open doorway, his Russian clipped and annoyed.

I brought my glass of wine to my lips and took a long pull, staring at the fire that had just been stoked in the hearth moments before by one of the staff.

Dinner would be prepared and served in ten minutes, and I was counting down the minutes until I could leave and be in the quiet solace of my own place back in the outskirts of Desolation.

I watched as the flames danced over the logs when my father returned. I turned and gazed over my shoulder to watch him slip his cell phone into the inner pocket of his suit jacket and come over to me. He gave me a soft smile and wrapped his arm around my shoulder, pulling me in close and kissing my temple.

"I'm sorry about that, darling. Work calls at the most inopportune time." His Russian had gone from harsh and rough when he'd been on the phone to sweet and gentle when he spoke to me.

I was used to him having to leave functions, to stop what he was doing in order to take calls. It just was how things worked.

"Are you ready for dinner? I had the staff prepare a feast so I hope you're hungry."

I was about to ask why he'd prepared such a large meal if it was just the three of us, when the sound of the doorbell ringing stalled our.

I looked at my father and saw a strange expression on his face as he gave me a smile.

A little bit later, there were footsteps coming closer, and a second later one of the staff announced our guest for dinner had arrived.

The man who stepped into the sitting room was tall and burly, his neck so thick it was like a tree stump, a scar slashing from his forehead and dissecting across his eye and cheek. It completely distorted his face, making it seem like he wore a perpetual scowl.

I took an involuntary step back.

The man was terrifying in appearance, and when he smiled a gold tooth at the side of his mouth flashed as he glanced my way. A shiver of unease passed through me when I saw his gaze rake up and down my body.

Despite being fully clothed, I felt completely bared at that moment. I stared up at my father but he was busy saying something low to my mother,

who straightened her shoulders and finished off her wine before coming to stand beside him.

“Anastasia, I’d like to introduce you to Ivan Borekov. He’s one of my *brigadier* generals from the West Coast. And I’ve invited him to dinner so you can get to know him better.”

I snapped my head in my father’s direction at that.

“So *I* can get to know him better?” My father gave me a tight-lipped smile. “I don’t understand what that means.” I probably should’ve kept my mouth shut, especially given the fact when I looked at Ivan, he couldn’t hide the frown or the lowering of his brow fast enough. But as soon as our eyes locked, it disappeared and he gave me a placating smile.

“Come on, sweetheart. Dinner’s waiting.”

I didn’t miss the fact my father changed the subject right away, or how he didn’t answer my question. But I silently followed him out of the sitting room and into the dining room, where the table was already set and a literal feast spread out for everybody.

I took my seat to the left of my father at the head of the table, and my spine straightened involuntarily when Ivan came to sit beside me. I gave him a polite smile and had to hold in my gag reflex as the overpowering stench of his cologne saturated the air around us. I actually lifted my hand and smoothed the finger under my nose, crinkling it.

My father snapped his fingers, and one of the staff came by with a bottle of wine, pouring a small amount into a glass so he could smell and taste it before giving his final approval. I felt Ivan’s stare and suppressed another shiver, refusing to look at him.

“You look absolutely stunning, prima.” His Russian was rough, not smooth and sophisticated like my father’s.

“Thank you,” I pushed through gritted teeth, hating that he used the endearment “prima” toward me when this was our first time meeting.

I tried to shift slightly away without being too obvious, but even sitting next to Ivan made my skin crawl. Ivan started to laugh deeply, as if my discomfort pleased him, which it probably did.

For the next few moments, everyone sat in silence as the staff served the first course, and I was doing everything in my power to bite my tongue. I didn’t want to overstep bounds or embarrass my father by questioning him. He always needed to be in power and control, especially in front of an

associate. But the longer I sat there, the more I knew I couldn't keep my mouth shut about what all of this was.

I cleared my throat and glanced at my father. "I'm not really sure what's going on," I said honestly.

He took a bite of his food before answering, wiped off his mouth, then picked up his tumbler of scotch before leaning back in his seat and looking at me as he took a long drink.

I could feel the awkwardness start to feel heavy in the room, oppressing. The stench of cologne, cigar smoke, sweat, and booze that came from Ivan slammed into me, and I started to feel beads of perspiration dot my brow.

It was only after my father set his tumbler back down and folded his hands in his lap that he finally answered me. "You know family strengthens bonds."

I had my hands curled tightly around the napkin that sat in my lap as I silently listened to my father. I bit my lip, waiting to see what he would say, the point he was getting at. Although I had a very sickening feeling I knew.

"And with those bonds comes alliances. Power."

Those beads of sweat that had made me feel overheated were now frigid droplets of ice on my skin.

"And so I'm very happy to announce that I found your suitable match with Ivan."

"We need to start planning a wedding right away," my mother said in a slightly slurred voice, her cheeks rosy as she downed the rest of her wine. Without saying anything else, she held the glass up, waiting for one of the staff to refill it.

My mother and father started talking about the guest list and planning my wedding as if I weren't even there and had zero choice in the matter. I was opening and closing my mouth, feeling my eyes widen, pure shock just settling into me.

I looked over at Ivan, but he was busy devouring his food in between taking large drinks from his tumbler of alcohol.

My heart was racing, I felt dizzy, and before I knew what I was doing I had my hands flat on the table and pushed myself up. It was such a sudden move the chair scraped against the hardwood floor, sending a screeching noise throughout the room.

The conversation ceased, and I felt all eyes on me.

As I looked between my mother and father, I felt tears prick behind my eyes. I was always one of those people who cried when they were angry, intense emotion making it impossible for me to act like I had any semblance of control.

But this was going too far. My parents had gone too far.

I felt like I couldn't breathe, like my chest was rising and falling harshly as I tried to suck in oxygen, my head feeling almost detached with dizziness.

"I don't know what's going on here," I said for what felt like the hundredth time.

My father's brow was lowered in confusion. I knew I was mirroring that same expression. I'd never had an outburst, not something like this, not since Kostya had left without saying a word to me. I'd always followed my father's rules, but he also gave me my independence, and never pushed me to do anything I didn't want to do.

And I thought I'd be able to have my own life after he'd agreed to let me stay in the city on my own, albeit with his guards to watch over me. But this… this was too much.

"I'm an adult." The words sounded sour in my mouth, as if I were throwing a temper tantrum. But surely I was allowed that when I was being pawned off to a man who reeked of opportunity and sadism.

I looked over at Ivan, who watched me with a stoic expression. I'd known men like him my entire life, had seen them come and go through this house as they spoke about killing their enemies and doing heinous things, all to gain more power.

Men like him, ones with so much power in organized crime, were used to getting their way. And a lot of the old-school ones expected the women at their side to be silent and obedient.

"You're being dramatic," my mother said. I looked over at her, shaking my head because I wasn't sure exactly what to say in response to that. "Your father and I were arranged and look at how well that worked out."

I couldn't tell if that was sarcasm in her voice. She had had too much to drink as it was, and her words slurred. But it was laughable, and that panicked sound left me in response.

My parents hated each other, but because they were bound to the rules of their world, stayed in a loveless, hate-filled marriage. They had one child, me, and even that wasn't enough to bring them together.

“I don’t want that kind of marriage. I don’t want what you and Papa have.” I thought I said the words in my head, but when I realized they were out, I felt this heaviness come from my father. I watched as he slowly rose from his chair and felt a strange coldness settle into me.

Instead of cowering in the face of discomfort, I straightened my shoulders and tipped my head up, showing him the strength he instilled in me all these years.

“For one, I’m not ready to marry.” I met his gaze head-on. There was a little bit of shock in his expression, probably because I never acted like this. Then again, I never had a reason to lash out.

“Overly dramatic,” my mother said again. “You don’t have to love your husband. You just have to pop out an heir or two, be obedient, and you’ll be fine—”

“Ksenia—” my father snapped, his lips pursed, his brows pulled low. “Enough.”

My heart was racing as I felt it pound against my ribs. “How could you do something like this and not talk to me about it?”

That hurt was starting to rise, a betrayal that I felt. My father at least showed a little bit of shame, maybe even remorse as he glanced away briefly before curling his hands into fists at his sides.

When he looked back at me, that shame that had been there moments before was gone, and in its place was the Pakhan--the head of the Bratva--I knew he showed others.

A ruthless leader, a savage boss.

I looked down at my plate and swallowed roughly, not sure what to say, how to respond to any of this. I felt like I was dreaming, like I was trapped in someone else’s body.

None of this felt real.

And my mother was no help, not as she sat back and watched everything as if it were her own personal reality TV show and guzzled back the wine. Maybe she thought I deserved this because she’d been forced to marry my father.

“What’s going to happen—” my father said in a frighteningly calm voice, “—is you’re going to sit back down, *dorogaya moya*, and we’re going to finish dinner. We’re going to move forward because you’re my daughter and you know how things work in our world.”

His tone brooked no argument. And I found myself sitting down, feeling like that little girl who'd been scolded by her father for not following the rules.

And so we finished dinner in all but silence. The only conversation being between the other three people at the table.

I ate quietly, finished off two glasses of wine, and then when the night was over I numbly said goodnight and left, knowing that this was not how my life was going to be.

I was not going to fold over.

I was not going to be a pawn in some Bratva move. I loved my father, but what he was doing was absolutely wrong and I wouldn't let my life be dictated by him.

Whatever the outcome or consequences of my decisions may be, I was sticking with them. Because the alternative was not an option.

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CHAPTER

FIVE

Ruin

I’d been called many things in my twenty-five years on this godforsaken fucking planet.

Ubiytsa. The killer.

The devil. A bastard without a soul.

But what I was known as now, the name I answered to, the only identity I connected with anymore was…

Razoreniye. Ruin.

I stood across the street from her apartment building, barely cleaned up from beating a man to death at the Bratva-owned underground fight club, Yama.

I found myself here every night, wanting one fucking glimpse of Anastasia through her bedroom window, knowing it was all kinds of wrong but I didn’t feel those kinds of emotions.

No shame or guilt. No sorrow or sympathy.

What I felt now was this proprietary need. Obsession. Possessiveness. And they all revolved around her. Anastasia.

After the fight, I changed out of my bloody shorts, washed the gore off my hands and chest, off my neck and face, and put on all-black clothing so I could blend in with the shadows and stalk her.

I looked down at my hands, the ones that I used to brutally take lives. I was a killing machine, molded by the very men who ran the underworld. I wasn’t fooled into thinking I wasn’t a pawn, an item to line their pockets.

And it was who I’d been for a long time, even before my father had taken me away to be fully shaped into the creature I was today.

They might have taken everything from me, my very humanity, but what they couldn't take from me was the one girl who was in that apartment building and thought I’d abandoned her.

She was all I had. All I held on to anymore.

I had no mother, and my father had died of consumption years before, his death long and drawn out, painful and one that made me feel perversely satisfied. I had no one and nothing but the Russian mafia and my fighting.

And the latter was the only thing I was fucking good at. Killing people in the most savage way was the only purpose in my life now.

I focused back on why I was here, what I planned on doing. It was the same routine every night, and a part of me knew I should’ve felt shame that I stalked her, that I watched her from the shadows, and that I did a hell of a lot more than that.

But it made me feel good, and I was a selfish, sociopathic bastard because I wasn’t going to stop, not when I got a rush of adrenaline and my cock got hard.

I knew the rotation of her guards like clockwork, had been watching them for the better part of a decade. And the little asshole who was currently stationed outside the front entrance of the apartment building had me narrowing my eyes. I could’ve snapped the fucker in half.

I was focused on him when I noticed her bedroom light turn on, and all my attention was trained right back where it belonged. The gauzy curtain that covered the single pane fluttered as she moved by it, and I curled my hands into tight fists as my whole body instantly reacted.

I didn’t even have to see her for this to happen to me. I just had to think of Anastasia, about how she smelled like wisteria, of how her long hair felt like silk between my fingers. I thought about how she looked when she slept, so peaceful, angelic, and so fucking beautiful that it was the only damn thing that could make my heart race for things other than killing.

My cock grew harder, a steel rod that throbbed at the thought of how perfect she was, how good she felt in my arms.

I kept to the shadows as I moved down the street, crossing the alley that was catty-corner to her building, before making my way over to a side door. I kept my focus on the piss stain of a guard, curling my lip in disgust. It would be so easy to just kill the asshole.

I should bitch slap Vladimir for putting such a worthless bastard in charge of the most precious thing.

I easily broke the bum lock that “secured” the door, one that needed fixing, but then again it allowed easy access to the one thing I wanted the most.

I was stealthy as I made my way up the stairs, the apartment building silent for this time of night. And then I was on her floor, standing at her door. Picking the lock was easy. Once in her apartment, I shut the door silently and locked it, standing there for a moment.

I could hear the shower running, and saw the light coming through the crack of her partially opened bedroom door. I moved around a small leather loveseat that sat in the living room, my boots not making a sound as I walked over the plush rug.

Her house smelled like lavender and lemon as I walked back past the kitchen and through the tiny hallway that led to her bedroom. I stood on the other side of her door, one hand braced on the frame, hearing her softly hum through the rush of water.

I slipped into her bedroom and just stood there a moment, inhaling the scent of her. She had a couple of clothes tossed behind a chair, and there was a book overturned on the small table by the window. Countless times I’d stood across the street just watching her sit in that chair and read that book.

I turned my attention to her bed that was made but slightly rumpled as if she’d lain down for a moment.

I walked over to the small vanity at the opposite end of where her bed was and ran my fingers over a small vial of perfume before picking it up. I opened the top and brought it to my nose, inhaling deeply, getting turned on at how good that smelled. There was nothing that smelled sweeter than my girl.

I softly groaned and closed up the perfume before slipping it into the pocket of my jacket. Maybe I should have felt shame for taking her shit, trinkets, little treasures that I kept like fucking trophies.

But I didn’t feel any guilt. It felt good to take them, because then I had a little part of her with me at all times.

I’d stolen a lot of things over the years, taking things from her apartment every time I broke in, things that would remind me of her when I was alone in the darkness.

A brush. A bottle of her shampoo. A fucking pair of panties I used to wrap around my cock as I jerked off. I was a deplorable bastard.

I walked over to the bathroom door and stood on the other side, hands braced on the frame as I leaned in. Steam came through the crack, warm heat that brought with it the scent of *her.*

I imagined all the soapy bubbles sliding down her body as she washed herself.

The shower cut off but I didn't move right away. I just stood there and listened to her push the shower curtain aside, and heard the soft *whoosh* of a towel being pulled off the rack.

I couldn't see into the bathroom, but I wouldn't have tried to anyway. I might've been a heartless bastard who did questionable, deplorable things, a man who killed without remorse, would maim to protect the one and only thing I held dear, but fuck, I wasn't a degenerate fucking pervert.

Jerking off in her panties notwithstanding.

I could see her shadow move past the crack in the door and stepped to the side, making sure she couldn't see me. For a second I just closed my eyes, wanting to push the door open and pull her into my arms, to tell her she was *mine*, that she had been for all these years.

I moved away from the door and went over to the closet, slipping inside, keeping to the shadows and partially hidden behind her hanging clothes. A moment later she exited the bathroom, her hair wrapped up in a towel, her body covered in an oversized T-shirt.

She wasn't wearing a bra, her small breasts firm and high, her nipples beaded from the change in temperature. My cock was hard, a steel rod behind the fly of my black cargo pants.

God, I was so fucking dark, hiding away like the predator I was, getting off on just the sight of her.

For the next ten minutes, I just watched her through the slats in the closet door as she sat on the edge of the bed and brushed her hair before braiding it.

She reached over and grabbed her cell phone from the small table beside her, staring down at it, her knuckles turning white because she held it so tightly. I felt my brows pull down low. Something was wrong. I could feel it coming from her.

With an almost resigned sound, she tossed the phone back on the nightstand and slipped under the covers before turning off the light,

plunging the room into darkness and muted shadows from the city spearing through the window.

It took only six minutes and forty-five seconds for her to fall asleep, and then I was moving out of the closet quietly, making my way over to the bed. I stopped at the edge, watching the rise and fall of her chest, seeing her dark braid across her white pillowcase like an ink stain.

I leaned in close, the strands of her dark hair smelling sweet, fresh, and clean. She used a citrus shampoo and conditioner, a subtle scent that was by far one of my favorite aromas. I lay down on the mattress and moved in behind her.

Looking down at the bedside table, I looked at the locket I'd left for her all those years ago. She still had it, still wore it daily. I felt my heart beat funny at that thought.

Anastasia stirred briefly but she was a heavy sleeper, and when I wrapped my arm around her and pulled her in close, her back to my chest, I heard her sigh of contentment and felt her body relax further against mine. Ana was so much smaller than me, feminine and soft, warm and perfect.

I'd never had a true home, but I imagined holding her was what that felt like.

Part of me knew doing this was probably wrong, a violation of her privacy, of her consent. But, God, it was the greatest fucking feeling in the world, even if she didn't realize I was doing it, even if she couldn't turn around and look me in the eyes like she had all those years ago when I slipped into her bedroom after everyone went to sleep.

I buried my face in her hair and scented her.

And for the next several hours, I held on to my girl, knowing I didn't have a heart or love to give, but whatever I had, it was irrevocably hers.

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CHAPTER

SIX

Anastasia

"And I told him I didn't think we'd work out, but he just wouldn't get it through his head."

I was barely listening to Katarina, one of my fellow dancers as we sat at the coffee shop down the block from the studio and grabbed a caffeine hit before we went to practice. I was idly running my finger over the face of the locket, the one I never took off unless I was showering or at dance practice.

"Mmm hmm," I said as I brought my cup to my mouth and took a long drink of the green tea I'd ordered. I stared out the large front window and watched the busy weekday life of the city move back and forth.

All morning I'd been thinking about the dream I had last night, the one where a faceless man came into my room, held me close, and told me I was his and no one else's. And I fantasized that it wasn't just a faceless man, but Kostya sneaking into my bedroom like he had all those years ago. I closed my eyes and shook my head.

Maybe I needed to talk to somebody, a professional, a therapist who could help me work through this clear obsession, this longing from a broken heart that I just couldn't shake.

Ten years was too long to be hanging on to something that could never be. Although I'd always prided myself on being optimistic, thinking positively in all aspects of my life, wishing and hoping for something that just wouldn't be wasn't healthy either.

I lifted my hand and picked up a strand of my hair and bringing it to my nose. I swore I could still smell that mystery man from my dream in my hair. My body heated.

I was absolutely losing my mind, especially given the fact I kept misplacing items. Jewelry, a shirt I'd taken off the previous night and swore I'd draped it over my bedroom chair, yet it was gone the next morning. Even my favorite perfume was gone.

I dropped the locket back and took another long sip of my tea.

"Yeah, I told him his dick was way too big and it just wouldn't work out. I mean, if we can't even fit in *that* way, how could we be together?"

I nearly choked on my tea as I snapped my head in Katarina's direction, my eyes feeling wide as saucers, liquid dribbling down my chin.

She gave me a smug look and pointed her finger before saying, "A-ha. I knew you weren't listening."

I felt my face heat as I blushed in embarrassment. "I'm sorry. I wasn't listening. My mind is just…" I set my cup down and threw my hands in the air as if that were the answer to all.

"What's going on?" Katarina leaned forward and took on a very serious expression.

Although she and I weren't the closest of friends, we saw each other daily for practice and, because of that, had created a kind of familial bond with each other. She was also one of the only dancers who wasn't green with envy or a massive bitch to me due to me being principal.

I exhaled and leaned back in the seat, not sure how much to tell her, although I supposed my forced engagement would be made public soon enough.

Tingling on the back of my neck had me lifting my hand and rubbing my nape. I looked out the window, that sensation of not being alone settling into me. And it had nothing to do with being in a crowded café.

It was the kind of sensation where someone was watching you and they didn't want that to be known.

"If you don't want to talk about it, I understand, but I'm here if you want to—"

"My family is very traditional in… pretty much everything." I was still staring out the window after I said that. "And because of our… culture, for lack of a better word, we have to abide by certain rules." I glanced at Katarina and saw her confusion.

“Is this some freaky cult stuff?”

Leave it to her to get me to laugh during an uncomfortable situation. “I mean, cult seems pretty fitting for it, I guess.” I shrugged. Of course I’d never tell her my father was part of an organized crime faction.

Maybe she’d be able to understand it more if I did make it seem like it was cultish.

“So my father has arranged a marriage for me, and the man he’s chosen… is not my first choice.”

Her eyes widened and she said, “Whoa.” She brought her coffee cup up and drank a hefty pull from it, her eyes still wide as if she couldn’t believe what I was saying. It wasn’t as if I said something extremely mind-blowing, or maybe I just felt that way because this had been part of my life.

“Needless to say, I haven’t been able to think about much since.”

“No shit,” she said.

I couldn’t help but laugh, feeling a little bit lighter that she was able to pull me out of the funk I was currently in.

“Is he at least good-looking?” The expression that instantly washed over my face had her grimacing. “Well, then there’s no plus side to it, I guess.” Her voice became softer. “At least if he was good-looking, it wouldn’t have been so bad.” She shrugged. “Girl, it’s hard dating out here.”

I absentmindedly rubbed the back of my neck again when that tingling started up. I looked out the front window of the café.

There, across the street and leaning against the brick of the building, was a man dressed in dark jeans and a black hoodie.

His head was slightly lowered so I couldn’t make out his facial features, but his size was massive. He stood a head taller than everyone else, his shoulders wide. I felt my body involuntarily straighten, this weird recognition igniting inside of me.

A city bus passed by, obstructing the view of him, and then he was gone. It was like one of those thrillers where the killer is standing on the other side of the street just gawking, and in a flash they disappear.

I absolutely was losing my mind.

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CHAPTER

SEVEN

Ruin

One-two. One-two. Duck and punch. Side step and uppercut.

I slammed my fist into the tattered punching bag that hung from the ceiling in my basement, the bag swinging wildly. Sweat covered my body, dripping down my temples and into my eyes.

I kept going. Harder, moving faster, my bare knuckles cracking into the bag, the skin breaking open, blood mixing with the sweat and dripping down my wrists and forearms.

I did this for another twenty minutes before finally sagging against the bag and breathing out, my lungs burning. I pushed away and walked over to the bench where the jug of water sat.

I drank deeply from it as I stared at the frightening visage of my reflection in the floor-to-ceiling mirror that took up one entire wall.

God, I was a fucking monster. Even I could see the death in my eyes and the gore littered across my body in the form of tattoos, violent insignias, and scars from a life of violence.

I looked over at my duffel, which sat on the floor in the corner of the room. I continued to drink deeply as my heart started racing for an entirely different reason, for a reason that had everything to do with a few items that were inside.

After finishing off the water and tossing the jug aside, I found my lack of self-control frustrating as I moved toward the bag. I crouched on my haunches and unzipped it before rummaging inside.

I pulled out the bottle of perfume I'd taken the night before, rolling the small glass vial in my hand before reaching in the bag again and curling my fingers around the scrap of silk.

My cock instantly came alive, stiffening, hardening against my track shorts. I slowly pulled out the panties, letting them hang from the fingers of one hand and gripping the perfume in the other.

I squeezed my fingers around both of them and brought the panties to my nose, growling low as pure, animalistic lust slammed into me. My cock throbbed and my balls drew up.

I was such a sick motherfucker as I opened up the perfume and brought it to my nose, inhaling deeply and groaning once more.

God, I could picture that she was right here with me. My Anastasia was so small, half my size. So breakable.

Jerking off sounded pretty fucking amazing right about now, but instead of being a dirty pervert, I put the perfume and panties back in my duffel.

After wiping the majority of the blood and sweat off my body, I went back upstairs. Once in the kitchen, I grabbed another bottle of water and downed it as I leaned against the counter and stared at my sparse home.

I bought the property five years back. It was two acres of land that was isolated enough from the city that it gave the illusion I wasn't actually who I was, that I didn't live where I did, and that I didn't do what I did.

But that was all it was… an illusion. I knew who and what I was. I embraced it. In fact, I fucking loved that human emotions didn't affect me the way they did others.

It made completing tasks and looking at things from a strategic point of view much easier when you didn't have fucking sympathy or empathy clouding your judgment.

But then there was Anastasia, my one fucking weakness, and although I knew that, I couldn't purge myself of my addiction to her.

I went over to the dining room table and unrolled the newspaper I'd picked up that morning, going to the section specifically covering Desolation.

It was always filled with crime, violence, and murder. I was about to turn and get cleaned up before I headed to Yama for more training when my body went ramrod straight at what I currently looked at.

My free hand curled around the paper, the sound of crinkling echoing in my ears. My other hand was in a tight fist at my side, my blunt nails

digging into the fleshy part of my palm so hard I knew I was breaking the skin.

Instant jealousy reared its head, a possessiveness that I'd only ever felt with Anastasia taking a stranglehold on me.

There, staring right back at me, was an engagement announcement. On the right-hand side was an image of Anastasia, and on the other was her prospective fiancé.

I knew the piece of shit who the paper claimed she was engaged to. It was one of Vladimir's generals, a disgusting fucker who was misogynistic, abusive, and got off on torturing anyone or anything.

I saw red as I looked at his picture. I slowly glanced up and across the room, my heart beating quick and hard, everything in my blood rushing through my veins as pure rage filled me.

Before I knew what I was doing, I gripped the edge of the table and used my strength to flip it over. Then I picked up a chair and tossed it across the room, shards of wood breaking, splintering before they crashed to the floor.

I raised my arm and slammed my fist into the plaster, my knuckle splitting open even more. I destroyed the fucking kitchen and living room, the kind of anger I felt not something I'd ever experienced before, not even when I was in the cage killing.

When it was all said and done, I stood in the center of my kitchen breathing harshly, my head lowered as I looked at where the paper lay on the ground, that engagement announcement spread open and staring back at me like fucking gasoline on a fire, igniting my rage all over again.

Anastasia was mine, and I'd fucking kill anyone who tried to change that.

Starting with Ivan.

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CHAPTER

EIGHT

Anastasia

I’d never felt the kind of anger before as I glared at the newspaper, at the entire page that announced my engagement to Ivan.

My hands were shaking as I braced them on my coffee table, sweat beading my brow, my throat tight and my mouth dry.

I blinked several times, my vision faded in and out, and I finally sat back on the couch, not sure what to do next.

God, I couldn’t even breathe as I lifted my hand and started rubbing the center of my chest.

Not only had my father sprung this engagement on me without my consent, but now he announced it to the entire world, expediting everything because he knew where I stood, probably assuming I wouldn’t cause problems.

Because women in our world didn’t. They submitted, conceded.

But telling him I was an adult and wouldn’t go through with this wasn’t causing problems. It was living my own life and being independent. And once again, he took that away from me.

I thought about calling him, but I had to do this in person. I wanted him to look into my eyes, to see the devastation he caused. He was quite literally ruining my life, making these life choices for me, pushing me on a man I didn’t want.

Did he not realize that forcing me to marry somebody, forcing me to not follow through with my dreams, to not be able to fall in love with who I wanted to, was like digging my heart out with a spoon?

My knees gave out and I sat back down on the couch, resting my elbows on my thighs. I wanted to cry, scream, and destroy the living room.

Distraction seemed like the most logical solution to make me feel better. But as the seconds ticked by, that faded and all I felt was detachment sucking the very life from me.

But I refused to let it weigh me down. I needed to hold on to that rage if I was going to face my father, and I sure as hell was going to. Right now.

I grabbed my keys and my purse and left my apartment, already knowing that I probably wasn't going to get very far with my father. But I also refused to take this lying down.

HALF AN HOUR LATER, I was standing in the foyer of my parents' home, my anger having risen tenfold as I waited for my father to make an appearance.

I was fixated on a family portrait that hung over the fireplace mantel. I'd been thirteen years old when it had been taken, just weeks before Kostya had left and everything toppled. When everything didn't feel like it made any sense.

I heard my father approaching but didn't turn around to face him. I needed to steel myself, to control my emotions. The last thing I wanted to do was break down and cry because I was so angry.

When he entered the room, I could feel the heavy weight of his stare on my back. I tightened my hand on the newspaper I'd brought with me. I closed my eyes for a moment and just breathed in and out three times before finally gathering my strength and turning to face him.

"You're upset."

I wanted to snap back that he was stating the obvious, but I bit my tongue. This conversation would be respectful. I'd make him see how in the wrong he was. When I didn't respond, he exhaled through his nose and walked over to pour himself a glass of scotch from the crystal decanter.

"What were you thinking?" I whispered, meaning to say the words louder but I felt like I was in such shock. I lifted my hand and showed the newspaper, waving the damn thing between us before tossing it onto his desk.

My father lifted an eyebrow, then seemed so nonchalant about the whole thing as he poured himself a drink and turned to face me.

“I saw the newspaper article. A full spread of my engagement to Ivan.” I held my hands up, palms out in supplication, my mouth opening and closing a few times because I wasn’t sure what else to say. And his expression was absolutely bland, as if I weren’t his daughter standing before him on the verge of tears because of the actions he’d taken that would drastically affect my life.

“Anastasia.” He said my name calmly, evenly. “Do you *understand* the type of man I am?”

I let my hands fall to my sides and curled my fingers tightly into my palms until my nails dug into my skin. For a moment I wasn’t sure what he was getting at, but I nodded slowly. “I know,” I whispered.

“Then why do you act so shocked about what’s happening?”

I glanced away, feeling my face heat. I knew who and what my father was, but I supposed I’d been living in a sheltered bubble where I didn’t see the type of man he *really* was.

I was an idiot, naive to think that the dangerous and greedy world that he—that I—surrounded myself with wouldn’t touch me. This was, after all, how things were done in the Bratva, so why did I think I’d go unscathed? Why did I think I would go untouched within it?

“Sweetheart, you know I love you, more than anything else.”

I glanced up at him and gritted my teeth, loving my father with all my heart despite the fact I knew he did horrible things.

“But I spoiled you for your entire life. I bent to your whims, gave you everything you wanted, anything you needed. I was lenient, broke rules for you so that you would be happy. But there comes a time when we all have to yield to the higher powers that be. You know this is how things work.”

I shook my head even though I knew what he said was true.

“As much as I wish I could keep you away from the ugliness that we’re so accustomed to, none of us are immune to that. Do you understand?”

Although his voice was soft, almost gentle, the kind of tone I remembered for so long growing up, I could see the hardness in his eyes. He wouldn’t bend to this.

“So the freedom you gave me growing up was nothing but an illusion?” I said those words more to myself than him. His frustrated sigh was loud, but I refused to look at him. “What was the point of any of it, of letting me

stay in the city, having my own place, thinking that I had a chance to create my own future, if at the end of the day none of it was real?"

"Again," he said softly. "I've sheltered you for far too long. And the reality of our world is that you should have been married with children by now. These are the rules, Anastasia."

"Sometimes rules are meant to be broken," I said in a harder voice, looking him directly in the eyes. He exhaled and shook his head as he brought his tumbler to his mouth and took a long pull from it, staring off into the distance.

"Not when it involves the Bratva, princess. You know this."

Perhaps I did.I had to try. I straightened my shoulders, forced myself not to cry out in frustration, and then breathed out slowly.

"This is my life and I will not have it dictated. I will not marry Ivan. I can't."

"I want you safe, and Ivan will ensure your safety and security. It will also make strong alliances." He took a step forward. "You will do this, darling, because you're my daughter, and going against what I say looks bad and trickles down. It makes me and the organization look weak, and that is not what is going to happen."

He glanced down at my locket, and I lifted my hand to cover it in a protective manner.

I knew at the end of the day what I said was an empty threat. Short of me running away, how could I ever stop this?

And even escaping this arranged marriage wasn't going to solve anything.

My father would find me. Always.

I found myself in a daze as I left my father and headed toward the front doors. I passed waitstaff, vaguely aware of murmuring my hellos and goodbyes to them.

"Shouldn't you be with Vladimir and doing the heinous things men like you do?"

It was my mother's clipped voice that drew me out of my thoughts. I stopped and glanced toward the sunroom, where I knew my mother was probably guzzling a carafe of wine.

"Vladimir asked me to leave his office because Anastasia came by and they're discussing things."

I recognized Timur's voice as he answered. My mother gave a very unladylike snort in response and then there was a long procession of silence, which I could picture was because she was downing a glass of chardonnay.

"Well, regardless, go loiter somewhere else."

I knew I was supposed to love my mother, but she made it unbearably hard. She was the most uncaring woman I'd ever met, and I was pretty sure the only reason she became pregnant was because my father wanted a child.

She never really saw me as a daughter, not that I ever felt like one to her. I felt as if I were an accessory, a tagalong that she was forced to bring with her to functions and to show off.

When I heard footsteps coming down the hall, I started making my way to the front doors, not wanting to be caught eavesdropping. But as soon as I walked past the archway of the hallway, Timur walked out, his hands in his pockets, his head lowered.

He had a scowl on his face, and we nearly would have collided if I hadn't sidestepped.

"Izvinite," he apologized but when he saw it was me, he gave me that brilliant smile I was so accustomed to.

He must've been able to tell by my expression that I was in a shitty mood, because his smile faltered and he tipped his chin toward the front doors.

We silently walked out together, and once the doors were closed behind us, I exhaled.

"Sometimes…" I didn't want to be a bad daughter or a bitch, so I chose my words carefully. "Sometimes my father is really difficult."

"I'd ask what's wrong, but I know."

I looked over at him. I wasn't surprised he knew. He was my father's right hand and knew everything that had to do with my father, even the personal things like my arranged marriage.

He was the only person my father trusted, confided in. If we were the Italian mafia, he'd be my father's *consigliere.*

"I'd say life's not fair but that sounds pretty childish." He chuckled and I wasn't surprised to see the humor come from him.

I felt a little of my irritation toward my father vanish. Timur was good at easing the situation. He was like the fun uncle, the kind who didn't take things too seriously.

“Everything will be okay. It’ll work out. You have your family, and you have me.”

I didn’t bother reminding him that my family was the furthest thing from supportive right now, and that despite him saying he was there for me, his loyalties were with my father and the Bratva. Always.

In that moment, I felt like I had no one.

I looked back out over the grounds, feeling like I was utterly alone.

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CHAPTER

NINE

Anastasia

I knew I was only making things worse by what I was about to do, but maybe—God, maybe—I could talk some sense into Ivan as well.

I rested my elbows on the table of the little Russian teahouse I was meeting him at and closed my eyes, a fierce headache coming on.

Although he'd raised a lot of red flags when I'd first met him back at my father's, he'd also seemed uncomfortable with how things had progressed, which gave me some hope that maybe if I could make him see my side, he'd be willing to speak with my father.

I didn't care if Ivan breaking off the engagement would make me undesirable in the eyes of the Bratva. I didn't care if I'd be seen as defective in the circles we ran. I'd much rather have that reputation than live the life currently predicted for me.

Although only a few days had passed since then, it seemed like a lifetime ago.

I straightened and rested back against the chair, watching the waitstaff serve the small handful of customers currently inside.

"Prima, what a pleasure to see you so soon again." His accent was thick and startled me. I spun around to see him standing a foot from where I was, his black suit fitted over his bulky body.

His dark hair was slicked back, and I could see beads of sweat lining his temples. His cologne surrounded me, but I pasted on a faux smile. The last thing I wanted to do was offend him, especially since my goal was to convince him I wasn't a good fit for marriage.

I stood and gave him what I hoped was a friendly smile and not one filled with tension because I wasn't sure how this meeting would go. My father obviously had no idea I was meeting with Ivan, and I didn't know if Ivan had told him.

I had to assume he did, yet he was still here so maybe not. He took my hand and brought it to his mouth, his lips rushing over my knuckles. Instantly I felt uneasy discomfort over that, but I kept my smile in place so as not to be rude.

When we were both seated at the table, he snapped his fingers, signaling the waiter to come over. After ordering some liquor—I kept the surprise to myself given the fact it was barely lunchtime—we sat in silence for a few seconds.

His gaze was unwavering as he stared at me, and the type of discomfort I felt had me shifting on my seat slightly.

"I have to say I was surprised, but extremely pleased when you reached out to me to speak. I feel like we need more one-on-one time together before the nuptials."

I swallowed roughly. Okay, maybe he hadn't spoken to my father, because surely if he had, he would know that I was not for this engagement and he wouldn't be acting like we needed to get to know each other more before the wedding.

The waiter came by and gave Ivan his drink, dropped off a glass of water for me, and then left. The silence descended as he kept staring at me.

His gaze was heavy and almost suffocating, his eyes penetrating me as if he could dissect every single little part of me. It was the same kind of look I'd seen a lot of the men in the Bratva had, as if they'd been molded to be these unfeeling, uncaring machines.

I suppose you had to be, though, when you were doing heinous things.

The back of my neck tingled, and I lifted my hand to rub my nape as I looked over my shoulder and out the front window.

It was pretty busy for this time of day, a lot of businesses having their employees take lunch, or people in town shopping.

Did they know that just ten minutes south they'd get to Desolation, where its namesake was pretty accurate?

There was a light touch on my hand, and I jumped slightly as I looked over to see Ivan smirking at me, his finger running back and forth over my wrist.

I pulled my hand out from under his and rested it on my lap as I gave him a tight smile.

Might as well get this over with, like ripping a bandage off.

“That’s actually why I contacted you.” I licked my suddenly dry lips. “I wanted to see you today so we can discuss the engagement.”

One of Ivan’s dark, bushy eyebrows lifted up and he brought his vodka to his lips to take a long drink. He didn’t say anything for so long that I started to fidget with the napkin on my lap.

“I just think… I think it would be best if it didn’t happen.” Of course hearing me say the words out loud to my betrothed sounded foolish. You didn’t just “get out” of an arranged marriage.

Was it foolish that I was even attempting to try to stop this? Yeah, yeah it was. Was it pointless, ridiculous, and made me out to be some kind of stupid woman who thought I could bend the rules of the Russian mafia?

Possibly, but I had to try, because if I didn’t then I would just be a doormat who lay back and accepted the man who’d been thrust upon her. I didn’t want to marry him. I didn’t want to have his children like I was some kind of vessel.

And if I never said that, never spoke my distaste about all of this, any kind of strength that I’d built up in myself would be for nothing.

“You don’t want to go through with the marriage?” His voice was easygoing, a little too calm for my comfort.

It had my skin tightening, prickling, and an array of red flags popping out in front of my vision.

“It’s just… It’s just I can’t marry you. No matter what my father says or what he’s promised you, this is not how I saw my future going.”

My palms were clammy, and my heart rate increased as I waited for him to say something. Anything.

“I’m not a good match for you, but I’m also not naive. I know the world we live in,” I said in a much softer voice so as to not draw attention. “I know what’s expected of me, but I’ve created a life for myself, have my own independence. Whatever this is between us,” I said and gestured with my hand in the space that separated us. “It’s not what I want. And I really hope that you can respect my wishes. I hope that you’ll understand that I’m not the woman for you.”

A bead of sweat ran down my temple and I suppressed the need to wipe it away.

“I’d like you to speak to my father with me, explain how you’d like to cancel the engagement.”

God, I felt like my heart was going to burst through my chest.

He got this strange expression on his face. “I can absolutely speak to your father, Prima.”

I felt a weight lift off my shoulders. “Really?”

He inclined his head. “I think it’s best we discuss things with your father if you’re having second thoughts. Best to get things settled.”

I slouched in my chair and offered a smile. “Thank you. I’m really sorry about all of this. I know this isn’t ideal, but I really appreciate you being so amicable and understanding.” God, he was agreeing with me?

Ivan was actually willing to help me work this out? It seemed too good to be true, but I held on to that hope.

“Just let me know when you’re free and I’ll work around your schedule to go talk with him.”

He didn’t say anything, just gave me a bigger smile right before he finished off his vodka and stood, gesturing for us to leave. I followed him out of the restaurant, that strange feeling that this was too easy filling me.

I made my way to my car and he walked behind me, whistling under his breath, which I found oddly unnerving. When I got to my vehicle, I glanced over to him.

“Thank you again. Here, let me give you my phone number—”

“I have it, Prima. You called me, remember?” he said and the smile he gave me now had my belly cramping.

“Oh, yes. That’s right. Sorry. I just have a lot on my mind.” I felt that tingling on the back of my neck, but I kept my focus on Ivan. Okay then. “I better get going.”

I went to get into my car when suddenly Ivan wrapped a meaty hand around my wrist hard enough a painful sound escaped me.

“You’re hurting my hand,” I said and tried to pull it back but he just curled his fingers tighter around me until I hissed out.

My heart started racing as I looked into his eyes, which were now narrowed. That easygoing expression he’d given me back in the café vanished really damn fast.

He leaned in so close that I was forced to back up, pressing against my car now, the handle digging into my spine.

For a moment he didn’t say anything, just stared into my eyes, then down at my mouth, before looking into my eyes once more.

“We can talk with your father, Prima. But it’s going to be about how you need to know your place.”

My heart raced double-time.

“We’ll discuss how pleased and excited you are for the wedding.” He grinned. “Vladimir has given you too much independence over the years. He should have been shaping you to be the perfect Russian housewife who aims to please her husband.”

His mouth thinned and his jaw clenched. The stench of the vodka poured from him and surrounded me, and I felt nausea rise up.

“Let go of me.” My voice was harder, firmer than I thought I was even capable of right now.

His nostrils flared and he gritted his teeth. “When you’re my wife, legally bound by the law and by our rules, you won’t be fucking running your mouth and trying to make deals. You’ll know your place. And that’s doing what I say, when I say, whenever I say.”

I pulled my hand back, and he finally released me. I started rubbing my wrist, my heart racing so fast it hurt and I swore anyone who was close enough would be able to hear it.

“I have to go,” I said with a hard voice and straightened as much as I could with him crowding me.

“You may have gotten your way with your Pakhan father, but you’ll learn quickly to heed to my ways, Prima.”

And then he turned and left, and I sagged against the car, feeling even more deflated—and pissed—than ever before.

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CHAPTER

TEN

Ruin

Staying where I was—hidden within the shadows of the alley between two towering buildings—and watching Anastasia was hard as fuck.

I'd wanted to go up to Ivan, wrap my hand around his thick throat, and slowly suffocate him right before I broke his neck.

Not only had he been too close to Anastasia, I'd seen the way he looked at her, practically felt the sick, sadistic desire pouring from him.

And not killing him right then and there had been a feat in itself. But I'd made sure Anastasia got to the dance studio safely, and then I decided how I was going to end fucking Ivan in the most painful way possible.

And that was how I found myself standing five feet from him, watching as he struggled against the bonds I used to secure him to the chair, listening to him cursing me out to hell and back.

I'd bound him and had to give the fat fuck some credit. He was stronger than he looked. Then again, I was letting him exhaust his angry energy, feeling dark amusement as he struggled. He wouldn't be able to get free. I knew how to secure someone, to knot the rope so every time Ivan moved the ties became tighter.

I leaned against his bedroom wall, running the tip of the hunting knife underneath my fingernails. Back and forth. Back and forth. Listening to the asshole struggling and cursing, spitting out a string of Russian that probably would have shriveled a lesser man's balls.

But when you didn't have any emotions, when you didn't feel fear, there wasn't anything that could touch you. The only thing that could penetrate

the apathetic shell that I was made of was the threat of anyone touching or hurting Anastasia.

“For such an old piece of shit, Ivan, you’ve got some stamina. I’ll give you that.” His response was more Russian insults hurled my way, ones concerning my mother, even my father. *“We can do this in Russian.”*

I pushed off the wall and took a step toward him, reaching out to undo the blindfold. I wanted to make it a surprise when I revealed his fate.

I tossed the blindfold on to the ground and took a step back, letting him blink his vision back into focus.

Sweat beaded down his temples, and he bent his head to rub his shoulder along the corner of his eye, wiping away the sweat. I moved back to the wall, leaned against it and propped a foot up, and went back to running the tip of my blade underneath my thumbnail.

The room was plunged in darkness and he hadn’t seen me quite yet, so I took the time to bask in the very clear unease he couldn’t hide.

“You stupid motherfucker,” he cursed out again and again and I smirked, although I didn’t feel anything at the moment but vengeance and bloodlust. *“I’m going to first rape your fucking mother, then your sister, and then I’m going to find you and gut you, pull your entrails out and make you eat them.”*

I didn’t bother correcting him that I had nothing, no one. Only Anastasia. But I had no doubts that if I did have a mother or a sister, he’d most definitely follow through with his threats.

Ivan Borekov was known as a butcher, reveling in disgusting tasks toward the fair sex before he finished them off. That’s why Vladimir kept him so close.

He was a lap dog that would run off and do Vladimir’s bidding no matter how dirty the work was.

It was when his vision finally cleared and he noticed me standing across from him that his entire body language changed.

I gave him a few seconds of just taking in the fact that I was the one he had to face off with. His back was ramrod straight, and a vein in the center of his forehead throbbed as our gazes stayed locked.

“Still want to rape my mother and sister?” My voice was conversational, low and deep. I loved that he didn’t bother asking how I got in, or how I got past his impressively heavy security. He and I both knew all that shit was nothing but a speed bump for me.

He knew all this because he was also one of the men who watched me train throughout the years, who made bets on if I'd be the first to fall.

He'd been there and watched as I was bloodied and beaten, as they broke me over and over again. He laughed, exchanged money for my downfall, for my winnings. He deserved to die just as much as I did.

He shook his head. *"I'm sorry. I didn't know it was you. I didn't know."*

I ignored him as I walked closer and crouched on my haunches, lifting up my hunting knife so the small sliver of moonlight that came through the parted curtains of his window caught the blade, glinting.

"I'm going to use this to cut out your tongue for speaking to her." I pressed the blade toward his mouth, watched his nostrils flare and more beads of sweat trickle down his temples. "I'm going to gouge your eyes out since you thought you were worthy enough to look at her." I ran the edge of the knife close to his right eye, seeing his body jerk from the contact.

"What do you want? I'll give you anything."

I slowly shook my head. "You know I don't need or want anything from anyone."

"I didn't know she was yours."

"You do now." I ran the blade down to his hand to tap it on the bone. "I'm going to break your wrists for touching her." I lifted my gaze to his face and hardened my features, letting the only real emotion I could feel—rage—build in me and project outward. "And after all that—" I slowly stood, "—I'm going to rip your heart out for thinking you could have her."

The fucker struggled and I just watched, finding sick satisfaction at his fear.

"You don't get fast and painless, Ivan." I smirked although I felt zero amusement. "I don't enjoy much in this fucking life, but Jesus, am I going to enjoy taking your life so damn much."

I brought the knife down and cut through the rope securing him to the chair. He glanced up at me, eyes wide, startled. It was clear he was confused on why I'd unbound him.

"I want you to fight back, Ivan." I leaned forward and let him see the sociopath I truly was. "It makes it feel so much better when I kill."

For a stout piece of shit, he was fast as he lurched out of the chair and stumbled forward and tried to get to the security panel with the panic button by his bedroom door.

I didn’t chase him, just stood there and watched him as he got to it, pressed the security button, and then fucking loved the shock on his face when it didn’t work.

“I—I… why isn’t it working?” He kept punching in the code, but after a few seconds turned and looked at me, eyes wide, sweat pouring from him, then he darted for the door.

I was on him, slamming my shoulder against his back so he crashed into the door, a harsh grunt leaving him. “If I found anything funny, I’d think it hilarious that you actually thought I didn’t check all areas of your security before coming in here to kill you.”

I pressed the knife to his nape until I scented the coppery tang of his blood as I cut into his skin. He squealed like a pig and I chuckled darkly.

“Ivan, this is nothing. We’re just getting started.” I pushed him across the room until he fell to his knees. He lifted his hands but I *tsked*. “No begging, Ivan. Be a man and fucking take it.”

I didn’t bother gagging him. I’d killed off all his security on the property so it wasn’t like anyone would hear his death. Besides, I wanted to hear him scream. I wanted to hear his pain. Then he would know how much he really fucked up.

I went to work on his wrist first, taking the knife and cutting the tendon that allowed movement. I brought my boot heel down, blood squirting, bone crunching, his cries the perfect fucking background noise.

His tongue was next, a disappointment because he wouldn’t be able to plead for his life, but still something that needed done. He dared to even talk to my girl, to *think* he was worthy enough to speak to her.

I gripped that thick muscle between my thumb and forefinger, pulled it out as he flopped around on the ground like a fish out of water, and brought my knife down and across it like I was cutting into a steak.

He screamed and cried, blood pouring out of his mouth as I held up the severed piece of his body in front of his face. I let it drop to the ground, a disgusting squelching noise filling the room. And then I went for his eyes.

The fact he looked upon her infuriated me. The knowledge that he desired her had my blood boiling. So I took extra pleasure as I gouged out his eyeballs, popping them out as if they were grapes that I’d put in a bowl.

By this point, he was only semiconscious, the scent of his blood filling the bedroom, the viscous fluid covering my hands and clothing.

With his eyeballs laid next to his tongue, I took a step back and admired my work. He was barely moving, making almost infantile noises. I crouched beside him and hushed him. “*Shhh.* It’s almost over.” I used the tip of the blade and pressed it under his chin, tilting his head back slightly.

Although I knew he couldn’t see me, I knew he could *feel* me.

“This last part,” I said softly. “This last part is going to be my favorite, Ivan.” He whined and, with what little bit of strength he had left, thrashed around, but I hushed him as I plunged the knife into his chest.

I slid the knife up, opened Ivan up like I was gutting a fish, and ripped out his heart while it was still beating.

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CHAPTER

ELEVEN

Anastasia

I didn’t know what woke me, but I felt this tightness on the back of my neck, the one I felt intensely over the last few days. I opened my eyes and stared at my ceiling, the lights from a passing car moving across the walls before fading away.

I pushed myself up and rested my upper body on my elbows as I looked around my bedroom. My bedside clock said it was just after two in the morning, and for some reason my heart was racing and I felt a heaviness all around me. I lifted my hand and placed it on my chest, feeling the organ beat rapidly.

I pushed the blankets off, suddenly overheated. I hung my legs over the edge of the bed, my toes brushing the cold wooden floor for a second as I stared out my window.

The curtains weren’t fully closed. I could see the city lights trying to make their way in. I hung my head and closed my eyes, exhausted, yet my body felt so wired for some reason, that tingling on the back of my neck still prevalent.

I lifted my hand and rubbed my palm over my nape before pushing up from the bed and heading to the bathroom. After I finished up and turned off the light, I stood in the doorway and just stared into my room, still feeling so… strange.

But I brushed it off just as I had in the situation with my father, then what happened with Ivan. Even now my wrist ached, and I could see bruises forming along my skin in nasty shades of purple and blue.

I absentmindedly rubbed the area, not sure what I was going to do or how I was going to figure this out.

Because right now it seemed pretty unsolvable.

A soft sound drew my attention to my bedroom door. I felt my brows draw down low, noticing it closed when I knew I left it open before I went to bed.

A shape in the corner of the room caught my peripheral vision. I turned my head and saw a massively large body step out from the shadows and move toward me.

A short but fierce scream spilled from my mouth, but it was cut off when the mystery man was on me, slamming me back, his huge form pressing me into the mattress, covering me from head to toe. He had a hand over my mouth, his lips right by my ear.

I was frozen with fear as his strength kept me pinned.

For long seconds, all he did was keep his body pressed to mine. He was breathing so hard, his warm breath brushing against my ear. He had his other hand braced on the mattress. And because I had my head turned, I could see he was clenching the blanket in his fist.

I felt like I couldn't breathe even though I was getting plenty of oxygen through my nose.

"Don't be scared."

My heart started racing faster as he spoke Russian low and deep. I couldn't tell what was familiar about him, but his scent reminded me of something. His voice was rough and husky, and I knew I'd never heard it before, but it caused this strange tingle at the back of my subconscious, as if nudging me that there was something *more* to all of this.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

I didn't know why I found his words even more frightening, but it was like an electrical shock jolted through my body, survival instinct kicking in, giving me one more burst of energy.

I fought, struggled beneath him, but his body was so big, so hard and muscular, that it was like a brick wall on top of me.

The hand that was by my head clenched against the blanket.

"Little dancer, I told you I wouldn't hurt you." His voice was rough and I couldn't tell if it was anger or something else. I lay frozen beneath him, knowing logically that if I wanted to survive I needed to be smart and not let my fear make me do stupid moves.

He was too strong for me to fight, especially in this position, so I lay there panting, accepting his weight on my body as he pushed me down further into the mattress.

I didn't know where my guard was, but it was clear if this man had broken into my apartment he'd have taken care of that protection.

I started breathing harder and faster, hyperventilating so it felt like I couldn't get any oxygen into my lungs.

"I need you to be a good girl and calm down." His voice was steady and smooth. "I'm going to take my hand off your mouth so that you can breathe easier. But you're not gonna scream, right?" Although he phrased it like a question, I knew it was anything but. "I need you to answer me, *milaya moyna*." *My sweet.*

My breath caught. Only one person had ever called me that.

He growled, and that confusion and fear ratcheted in me.

He moved the palm that was on my mouth down to curl around my throat. And although the weight was heavy, he didn't add pressure and I could breathe easily.

I closed my eyes and squeezed them tightly, feeling tears track down the corners.

A rough noise came from his throat, and I couldn't help but feel like he was pleased that I obeyed and hadn't yelled for help. I sucked in big gulps of air. That dizziness started to fade the longer I breathed in and out.

Soon I wasn't panting, my head didn't feel dizzy, and I was thinking more rationally.

He removed the hand that was around my neck to place it beside my head. He braced his palms on the mattress and pushed his upper body up slightly so his face hovered above mine.

He wore a hoodie, which concealed most of his face, and although it was too dark in the room to see his features, and my eyes were blurry from crying, I did spy tattoos creeping up his thickly corded neck when he shifted slightly above me.

For long seconds, neither of us said anything or moved. I was too terrified to do anything else.

"Please don't hurt me," I managed to whisper, my voice so threadbare I didn't even know if I'd said the words or just thought them.

He didn't respond which terrified me even more.

“Please don’t kill me.” Although I was crying, they were silent tears, slipping out the corners of my eyes and moving along my temples.

“I’m not going to hurt you.” The lights from a passing car illuminated the room for just a second and I got a glimpse of his eyes. They were dark and strangely… familiar. And then we were plunged into darkness once more.

Oh, God, what was worse than death? *Is he going to rape me? Keep me pinned to this bed as he takes advantage of m*e? And although I should’ve been even more terrified at the thought, for some strange, inexplicable reason, I wasn’t feeling that immobile terror as I felt just moments before when I looked into his eyes.

He muttered something under his breath, low and harsh, something I couldn’t quite decipher before he turned his head and stared at my bedroom door.

A moment passed in which both of us didn’t move… where I didn’t even breathe. And then I heard footsteps coming closer.

God, Igor… my guard was still here? How’d he even get into my apartment? Guards didn’t have access unless… my father crossed lines and gave them keys.

I should have been relieved Igor came to be my potential rescuer, but I just *knew* the man above me was far too dangerous for Igor to take on.

God, this had gone from bad to worse.

But my would-be attacker didn’t act like he cared, didn’t act like it bothered him that I was afraid or that someone would catch him. He just hovered over me, staring into my eyes, my breath stalling as he slowly cocked his head to the side and looked at my bedroom door once more.

“He’s worried about you,” he murmured.

“Please don’t hurt him. He’s just doing his job.”

I let my gaze travel down to his neck where I could see Russian tattoos depicted on his skin. I couldn’t see them clearly, but I could see a Russian doll on the side of his throat and script in old Russian—proverbs about death and life written on his flesh.

My thoughts were whisked away when there was a soft knock on my door followed by Igor saying, “Miss Mulkova, are you okay in there?”

The man on top of me looked at me a second before he leaned in close and his lips brushed the shell of my ear. “Go on,” he said in a husky voice. “Call out to him. Give me a reason to kill him.”

I felt my eyes widen even more at the same time he pulled back.

“I don’t need a reason to kill him, but I will, gladly so, if he gets between us.”

I slowly shook my head—my nonverbal response that I wouldn’t say anything. I wouldn’t have someone’s death on my hands.

And I knew that even if I did cry out for help, Igor wasn’t a match for this man. He just had an unsurmountable danger—an evil presence—that surrounded him.

“Tell him you’re fine.” His gaze flickered over my face, settling on my lips a second before he looked back in my eyes.

I licked my lips and watched as he lowered his gaze to watch the act. My heart was speeding so fast I became dizzy, which seemed implausible given the fact I was lying down. I closed my eyes for a minute, trying to regain my composure, and when I opened them again, I forced myself to exhale slowly.

“I’m fine.” I was shocked that my voice was as steady as it was. I held his gaze, hoping he could see that I wouldn’t be easily broken. The corner of his mouth kicked up as if I said those words out loud, and I swore I sensed a bit of… respect coming from him.

He wouldn’t stop staring at me, his focus so intent, unwavering.

“I heard a scream,” Igor said. I squeeze my eyes shut and breathed out slowly again before answering.

“It was just a bad dream, Igor. I’m fine. You can go now.”

My voice caught at the end when the man above me pressed his chest more firmly against mine. I felt him move his hand closer to my throat, the gentle brush of his fingers causing my skin to tighten. And when he moved the pads of those digits along my pulse point right beneath my ear, a small sound escaped me.

And then Igor tried the doorknob, and I knew I hadn’t fooled him enough.

“Igor,” I said with more firmness in my voice. “I told you I’m fine. I need you to leave now.”

I was breathing harder, and Igor pounded on the door again, cursing in Russian, knowing something was wrong. I made a frightened noise and tried to push the man off me.

Surprisingly enough, he obliged. I pushed myself back on the bed, panting heavily, looking at the door.

The massive man stood on the other side of the bed just watching me, shadows covering him, and along with the hoodie over his head, I couldn't make out any of his features aside from the sheer size of his body.

It was only when Igor started slamming his body against the door that the other man moved toward it. He reached out, unlocked it, and pulled it open as he stepped aside.

Igor stumbled inside, having been in the process of hitting the door once more with his body.

He looked around and spotted me on the bed, his gun in his hand. And I swear to God, I saw the other man smile in the darkness as he reached out, gripped Igor's head, and twisted it to the side so unnaturally that the crack of bone breaking filled the interior of my room.

I was pretty sure I was screaming, but I couldn't hear anything past the rush of my heartbeat through my ears. Igor crumbled to the ground in a lifeless mass, and I felt the vibrations all the way from where I sat.

And then everything else went in slow motion as the other man reached into his pocket as he moved toward me.

He was on me before I could escape, pressing a cloth over my mouth and whispering Russian in my ear.

"*It's okay. I won't hurt you. The fact he thinks you're his*—" he leaned down and smelled me, inhaling deeply at the side of my neck, "—*meant his death*."

I struggled and fought until the heaviness started to claim me, when a sickly sweet scent filled my nose and saturated my head.

And then everything went dark.

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CHAPTER

TWELVE

Ruin

I knew they were already looking for her.

They could try, but they wouldn't take her from me.

There was no doubt Igor had called it in when he heard her scream. But it didn't make a difference if Vladimir sent an army. Anastasia was mine.

And although I'd bought this place using a fake name and credentials, Vladimir had a lot of fucking connections and could pull a hell of a lot of strings.

But I'd slaughter every single one of the fuckers before they touched a hair on her head.

Her father was a ruthless Pakhan of the Bratva, and Anastasia was his light and joy despite him pawning her off to a piece of shit like Ivan.

I lifted her out of the back of the SUV and carried her inside and straight toward the bedroom. My room. When she was on the bed, I took a step back and just stared down at her.

Fuck, ten long years I'd yearned for her, the only part of my humanity left leading straight to Anastasia.

And although I wanted her to be in my bed, a part of me knew it wasn't possible. How could it be, given my life?

I allowed myself only another minute to just stare at her before I left the room to grab her a bottle of water and a couple of ibuprofen for the headache she'd have when she woke.

Once I had them set on the table beside the bed, I left again, closing the door behind me and walking over to my duffel. I unzipped it and started pulling out my weapons.

A 9mm Beretta, a .38 special, and a Glock.

I grabbed my two hunting knives. Rope, zip ties, and several boxes of ammo for each gun. I kept myself busy as I went around and checked the security cameras I had stationed around the outside of the house, then stood on the porch for a suspended moment in the darkness.

I wasn't surprised she didn't recognize me as I'd pressed her against the mattress in her bedroom and we stared into each other's eyes.

For a moment I thought I'd seen a flare of familiarity, but her fear had been too prominent to allow anything else in.

But I had to believe there were some parts of her subconscious that would never forget the connection that we shared.

But I had changed a lot in the last decade. Tattoos covered me from head to toe. I was scarred, the humanity stripped from me like a knife peeling the skin off an apple.

Although I didn't need any of these weapons, seeing as I could kill a man with my bare hands, I wanted to make sure I had all avenues checked that were concerned with keeping her safe.

I didn't want to keep her hostage or a prisoner. I didn't want her to grow to hate me, which she probably already did, and I sure as hell didn't trust myself when the time came to talk to her.

Because I knew everything would come out in the open. I wouldn't lie about the kind of deviant I was, what I'd done, and what they made me do.

I'd tell her everything, how the world we lived in was even more fucked up than she could ever imagine. I didn't want to tell her any of that because I knew she probably wouldn't be ready to hear it. Who would be?

I sat down, eyes trained on the bedroom door, and proceeded to clean my guns, knowing that when they came for her I'd be fucking ready. I'd have corpses littering the ground by the time it was all said and done.

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CHAPTER

THIRTEEN

Anastasia

Consciousness was a slow friend, a soft touch, that I wanted to cling on to because it just felt like nothing could hurt me.

But then when reality slammed back in, it was painful, causing my head to throb, my stomach to clench and roil, and my mouth to be bone-dry. And that's how I felt right now as I slowly woke up, my throat aching, my entire body feeling as if I'd been put through a meat grinder.

I groaned and burrowed my face deeper into the pillow, breathing in and out slowly to try and stop the wave of rolling nausea that tried to rise up.

But as I inhaled, I took in the dark, spicy scent. It was an aroma that had my heart racing and had that familiar fear claiming me once more.

And that was when everything came rushing back to me.

My eyes snapped open of their own accord, and I pushed myself up in bed. But the movement was so fast that I had to place a hand over my mouth, fearing any contents that were in my stomach would come out.

"I wouldn't move. You're going to end up getting sicker than you are."

For a split second I froze, looking around the room for the source of the deep voice. It was still dark, so I couldn't have been out for too long. Unless it was the next night? Oh, God, where was I? What was he going to do to me? He had killed Igor, and that image played through my head over and over again.

I saw him sitting in a chair in the corner of the room. And he looked so at ease, as if he hadn't broken into my home, killed a man in front of me, drugged me, and then taken me to… wherever I was right now.

“I’d turn on the light, but I know your head is probably pounding and the light is only going to hurt more.”

He slowly rose from the chair and even in the darkened room, I could see the muscles rippling across his body from the movement. Gone was the hoodie and he now wore a dark T-shirt that was form-fitted to his very broad shoulders and defined chest.

He still wore the dark cargo pants and combat boots, and I didn’t know why seeing him this way made him appear even more menacing than before.

I wasn’t sure if he could see my expression or hear my rapid breathing, but a second later he walked over to the wall and turned on the light switch.

Muted yellow light filled the room. I hissed as I closed my eyes and lifted my hand, shielding them from the harsh glow. The pounding was intense, the nausea rising up even more.

“I told you.” There was no judgment or accusation in his voice. He kept it pitched low, almost… gentle in his tenor. “Do you want me to turn it back off?”

I was nodding before I could stop myself. A second later the room was submerged in darkness once more.

The headache didn’t immediately go away, but after a few seconds the pounding subsided and I was able to exhale in a semblance of relief and dropped my hand to my lap.

He hadn’t moved from the place by the wall, just watched me so intently that I actually reached for the comforter and pulled it up to my chest, as if it were a shield that could block me from his prying gaze.

For long seconds we didn’t speak, with me just sitting on the bed, unable to move away from his predatory gaze.

“You should drink that water and take the pain reliever. Waiting is only gonna make it feel worse.”

I glanced over at the bedside table to see a ibuprofen and a bottle of water. I looked over at him but didn’t reach for it, and when he exhaled in frustration, I wanted to tell him to fuck off.

“I told you I wasn’t going to hurt you. If I wanted to, I could’ve done so ten times over by now.”

“Pretty sure drugging me is in the very definition of hurting someone.”

He lifted a hand and ran it over the back of his hair, the dark strands too short for the movement to make them mussed.

“That’s the least fucked-up thing I’ve ever done, sweetheart.”

I felt my fear start to take a back seat as annoyance took hold. “Don’t call me that.”

The corner of his mouth kicked up ever so slightly, but he caught himself almost immediately, that apathetic expression falling right back in place like a veil of stoic disinterest.

“What should I call you then? Anastasia? Little dancer? *Milaya moyna?*”

My heart lurched in my chest, my mouth drying, and my throat tightened. I hadn’t heard that endearment in so long that I felt tears tingle the back of my eyes. It also had this strange nagging prick at my brain, pulling at memories with Kostya.

No, those innocent, precious memories would forever stay locked in a vault deep within me where no one could touch them.

“Who are you?” I whispered. I saw something else flicker across his face before he masked it quickly.

“Razoreniye.”

I felt confusion fill me. “Ruin? You’re called Ruin?” I shook my head.

He laughed but it sounded so dead… like he probably was inside. “That’s what I am. Ruined, sweetheart.” He held his arms out, his biceps flexing, the veins in his forearms pulsing under his tattooed skin.

I could see scars littering his bare, inked skin, wondering what his story was, how he was so damaged, but it wasn’t just on the outside. I could see how cold he was on the inside just by staring into his eyes.

“You killed Igor.” I felt horror as the memory of his neck being broken played through my mind over and over again, pushing past everything else.

“I did,” he finally said without a hint of remorse. “You feel empathy over that fucker’s death? You feel grief?”

“How could I not? He was a human being—”

“—you knew nothing about him.”

“I’ve known him for years as he watched over me—”

He moved forward so suddenly that my words trailed off as I felt my eyes widen. I pressed my back to the headboard.

But he didn’t come closer and instead walked over to the window, pushing aside the sheer curtain to look outside.

“Would it ease you to know that his death was justifiable?” He didn’t look at me as he said those words.

“Murder is never justifiable.” I swallowed a thick lump that was lodged in my throat. I kept my focus trained on him, watching for any signs that he was about to come after me.

I looked over at the door, which was opened, and when I glanced back at Ruin, I could see he was watching me.

“You could run. But there’s no place that you can hide from me. There’s no place I can’t find you.”

He shoved his hands in the front pockets of his dark cargo pants and took a step forward. Then another.

“I’d have no problem killing anyone who tried to keep you from me. Because, sweetheart, I’m done waiting.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. So I kept my mouth shut, thinking it was probably the smart thing to do. The last thing I wanted was to agitate him, to give him any kind of reason to hurt me.

He exhaled slowly and took another step toward me. But when he saw that I pressed my back even harder against the headboard, gripping the comforter on either side of me, a strange expression crossed his face before it hardened once more.

“Igor was worthless, a disgusting waste of human space.”

I didn’t bother denying or agreeing. I just kept my mouth shut and waited for him to finish.

“Did you know the man stationed to look after you was a coldblooded killer?”

“I’m surrounded by killers,” I said before I could stop myself.

“You’re protected and coddled, kept in a bubble so you don’t really know the fucked-up shit the men around you do.”

My breath caught.

“Igor killed children. He killed Russian boys who couldn’t or wouldn’t follow through with Bratva orders.” He took a step toward me but I was frozen and shocked by his revelation. Of course he could be lying, but why did I believe him?

“How do you know this?” It was probably a very foolish question. It was very clear he knew about me, personal things like how to get into my home, and who was guarding me.

And I had no doubt he knew much more than that.

He didn’t respond.

“It’s a shame you don’t recognize me, *milaya moyna*. Because for the last ten years, you’re all I’ve thought about.”

And at that he turned and left, leaving me in shock because I knew why I’d felt this familiarity with my captor.

I now knew why his eyes had evoked this weird feeling in me, pulling my memories up.

Ruin was Kostya.

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CHAPTER

FOURTEEN

Anastasia

For a long time after Kostya left, I just sat there, staring at the bedroom door, unable to move because I was scared shitless and because I felt like the world had just opened up and swallowed me.

How was that beast of a man the sweet boy I'd once known? How had a decade shaped him into the scarred, tattooed man who went around breaking into women's homes and kidnapping them… killing without a shred of mercy?

That might be Kostya, but in my heart I knew he wasn't the boy I'd known all those years ago.

Wherever he'd gone, whatever he'd been doing this entire time had created someone I didn't even recognize. My body might recognize the familiar scent of him, or the memory of how good I'd felt when I looked into his dark eyes, but that didn't mean my Kostya was back.

I probably sat there for five minutes staring at the door, expecting him to come back in. When I was certain he wasn't coming back right away, I exhaled and looked around the room.

It was minimalistic, sparse even, with the only actual pieces of furniture being the bed, the small nightstand beside it, and a dresser pushed against the wall on the other side of the room.

There was the bedroom door, one that led to the closet, and another that opened up to the bathroom.

My gaze landed on the window and I found myself getting up and rushing toward it, only to realize it was painted shut and no amount of

trying to pry it open would make it budge.

When my arms ached from trying to lift it open, I turned to face the room again, sagging against the pane. I glanced at the bedroom door, not even about to see if it was locked.

It wouldn't matter if he left it open anyway, because I knew he would be the main obstacle even if I was able to leave the room.

I closed my eyes and exhaled wearily before lifting my hand and rubbing my eyes. How could that be Kostya? How could that be the boy I'd grown up with, loved and laughed with… the one I knew would always protect me?

When I opened my eyes, I stared off across the room for a suspended moment, not able to think about what my next move would be. I didn't want to be a damsel in distress, but I felt like that was exactly what I was.

I swept my gaze around the room, trying to find any little detail that might give me a hint of where I was. I looked at the dresser, and I felt my brows lower as a few familiar things caught my attention.

I pushed away from the window and went over to the piece of furniture, stopping and looking down at the top, this weird dread almost filling me as I reached out and picked up the little bottle of my perfume.

I noticed my hand shook as I held it in my palm, felt my heart race as I set the bottle back down. Seeing my perfume here made my anxiety rise because it meant he'd been in my bedroom before. Maybe he'd taken it tonight?

A cold sweat broke out across my forehead as I pulled open one of the top drawers and saw socks and briefs, and oversized white and dark T-shirts. Another drawer held sweats and I went through all of them, seeing nothing but Kostya's clothes inside and feeling a little of that panic fade. I realized I'd expected him to have a stash of little treasures he'd swiped from my bedroom tucked inside the dresser.

I turned around to face the bed, then looked at a small bedside table that had one lone drawer. My feet were moving before I realized I was making my way toward it, and then I reached out and pulled it open.

One of my hands lifted to my mouth on its own, and I felt my eyes widen as I saw what was inside.

A pair of my panties.

Oh, that sick asshole.

I felt that fear and anxiety once more start to fade as I grabbed my underwear and curled my fingers around them, anger replacing every other emotion.

I turned and went to the dresser, grabbed the perfume, and with my breath sawing in and out of me, stormed to the door and wrenched it open.

I instantly saw Kostya across the hall, seated at a dining room table, the light above him illuminating all the weapons spread out on the top. Not only was he a pervert, he was obviously a maniac and weapon enthusiast.

He faced me, shadows teasing his features as we stared at each other. Then his gaze flickered to what I held, and he cocked an eyebrow as he looked back into my eyes.

"You sick bastard," I found myself gritting out and moved down the hall, stopping right before I got into the archway that led into the great room. I hurled the perfume and panties in his direction as hard as I could.

The underwear only got halfway down the hall, but I was proud of myself when the perfume banged against the edge of the table. He looked down at where it lay, the top having been popped open, its contents spilling out across the scarred wood.

He glanced at me and cocked his brow again, the corner of his mouth lifting up. The asshole was amused.

My heart was thundering as it occurred to me I was missing something special. My hand went to my throat where I found… nothing but smooth skin. *Oh*, *God*. "Where is it?" I narrowed my eyes at him. "The Kostya I know might be gone and in its place… you. But he left me that locket and I want it back. Now."

I was breathing so hard I thought maybe I'd pass out, but then I allowed myself some critical thinking, to focus on what was right in front of me. I could see his front door ten feet from where he sat. I could see the deadbolt was unlocked.

But I didn't linger on it, not wanting to draw attention to it so he didn't know what I was thinking.

"I assume it's on your nightstand where you always leave it before you go to bed."

I tightened my hands into fists. "What happened to you?" I said in an accusatory tone and shook my head, clenching my hands so tightly my nails dug into my palms. I would've hissed out in pain if I wasn't so worked up, adrenaline rushing through me.

He didn’t answer but he did place his palms flat on the table and slowly rose, the chair scraping against the hardwood floor behind him.

We stared at each other for a long second before he started walking around the table. I moved to the side, keeping close to the wall as I edged away from him.

Kostya didn’t charge at me, but he was watching me as if he were a predator about to pounce on its prey.

Just get close to the door. Run outside. You can shout, scream, run as fast as you can.

I didn’t care that I was in my pajamas or barefoot. I didn’t care if there was nothing out there to save me. I refused to stay here with Kostya. No… Ruin. His new name suited him well.

We kept playing this dance of movements, with him taking a step closer and me edging to the side and away from him. And then I got to the couch, the leather smooth as I gripped the back of it, never once taking my focus off him.

“You’re so sick,” I finally said. “How many times did you sneak into my bedroom?” I felt my heart thundering in my chest. “Did you sneak in to take my stuff, bring it back here, and jerk off like the pervert you are?” I was trying to keep him occupied and didn’t want him to catch on to what I was moving toward.

“I did break into your apartment. Many… many times.”

Coldness washed over me, and for a moment, I was frozen in place as I just stared at him.

“I broke in and I took a pair of your panties first.” He took a step toward me and I moved one step to the side. “Then I took your perfume.”

Another move toward me. I was so close to the door. So close.

My breath caught. “You’re not Kostya—”

“I haven’t been Kostya for a very long time, sweetheart.” One more step toward me. “I don’t even need to tell you how disgusting I am.” He smirked and there wasn’t anything pleasant about it. “Because you already guessed it, baby. You know exactly what I did with your panties.”

The air rushed out of me as he confirmed the depraved shit he did.

I didn’t hesitate, just turned and ran the remaining few feet toward the door, wrenched it open, and then I was rushing down the porch and into the dark night.

My feet were screaming in pain thirty seconds after I hit the ground running. Pebbles and sticks, and debris, littered across the forest that surrounded wherever I was, digging into the soles of my feet.

But I moved faster, pumping my arms harder. And I could hear him behind me, the heavy fall of his booted feet coming closer and closer, the image of that huge body taking up the space so that soon there would just be *him*.

He came in closer… and closer…

And then I screamed out when I felt his body connect with mine. I was propelled forward, bracing myself for impact, but right before I hit the ground he shifted us so he was the one who took the brunt force of the fall, my body landing on his chest.

The air *whooshed* out of me, and I scrambled off, trying to push away from him. But his arms were like vises around me, locking me in tight against his hardness.

“Stop fighting,” he growled against my ear and I shivered, warring emotions rising up in me.

I didn’t want to like the feel of him. I didn’t want to like the wild, spicy scent that came from him and surrounded me.

I didn’t want to have my mind and body soften toward the boy I once knew, the boy whom I once loved with all my heart.

Because that’s not who held me right now. Not anymore.

“I said I’m not going to hurt you. I’m trying to protect you.” His voice had gone harder, huskier, sharp like a blade scraping over my skin yet he didn’t cause pain.

He was right. He could’ve hurt me, ten times over. He could’ve done unspeakable things to me when I was passed out.

But that didn’t excuse any of the things he’d already done to me.

“You already have,” I screamed and started crying, something opening up inside of me that I couldn’t stop.

Before I knew what was happening, he was off the ground and lifting me into his arms.

I struggled again before he hauled me over his shoulder like I was a bag of flour.

I beat on his back as he started toward the house. I felt a sharp slap on my ass.

“Ahhh,” I screamed. The fucker just spanked me. *Spanked me!* “You bastard,” I cried out, my anger so strong it was like a living entity in me. He gave my ass another stinging slap and I gritted my teeth.

“Fight me all you want. Get it all out if it makes you feel better and gets us past *this.*” His voice was harsh and rough as if *he* were angry, but for some reason I knew it wasn’t directed at me. “Because no one is filled with as much rage as I am, Anastasia.”

Exhaustion started weighing heavily on me, and I found myself sagging against him.

He made quick work walking us back to my prison, and once in the room he set me gently on the bed, then took a step back and crossed those beefy arms over his chest, stretching that dark T-shirt impossibly over all those muscles and pissing me off even more because I noticed.

I saw streaks of blood on his arms, little cuts from him chasing me through the woods. I looked down at my own arms and legs, seeing they were covered in scrapes and dirt.

And as the adrenaline faded and I could think rationally, I realized my feet throbbed, the soles so battered I hissed when I lifted one leg to look at my heel.

“You tore yourself up,” he said matter-of-factly. “And for what?”

I felt my nostrils flare as my anger surged again.

“There it is,” he murmured, his eyes growing heavy-lidded.

“What?” I said through clenched teeth.

He took a step closer and let his gaze travel up and down my body. And damn my traitorous hormones for lighting me up at the way he made a low hum of pleasure, at how his focus lingered on my thighs, which were on full display because my sleep shorts had risen up damn near to my hips.

“Getting all angry, talking back to me…” He looked into my eyes. “Pretending you’re not afraid of me when everyone else is.” He leaned in and braced his palms on the mattress, all up in my personal space. “Mmm, no one ever acts the way you do to me. They are too afraid.”

I refused to respond, just glared at him.

“Yeah,” he groaned. “There it is.” His voice was husky and low. “That fire I remember so well from all those years ago.” He leaned in even more, and the concentrated masculine scent of him filled my head. “That spark of life that I no longer have.” He stared deep into my eyes and I held my

breath as every synapse awakened in me. “The flare of everything I no longer am that turns me on, makes me so fucking hard, sweetheart.”

The air left me violently, and I hated that I saw the pleasure and amusement in his eyes.

I reached out and pushed him back, my hands on his shoulders, but it was like moving a mountain.

And then he was gone, standing on the other side of the bed, his arms crossed again, that apathetic mask back in place.

He acted like he hadn’t all but admitted to doing lewd things with my panties. He acted like I hadn’t just tried to escape this imprisonment. He pretended like he wasn’t just saying obscene shit to me and causing my body to get aroused in this totally screwed-up situation.

“Don’t try and run again.” His voice was cold. “I’ll find you. Always.” A long moment of silence stretched out. “You think I haven’t known where you’ve been for the last ten years? You think I haven’t watched you more times than you’d feel comfortable knowing about over the years?”

My breath caught, and I gripped the blanket on either side of me.

“You think I would ever let anyone have you?” He shook his head and I saw his jaw clench. “You’re mine. Not his. You’ve been mine since before you even realized it.”

I stared at him, really let those words sink in, trying to make sense of it. What did he mean he wouldn’t let anyone have me? A thick lump formed in my throat as I thought of Ivan, this deranged, twisted hope filling me.

Had Kostya… had he done something to Ivan that would have canceled the engagement?

God, what was wrong with me that I was even contemplating that as a positive scenario in this already fucked-up situation?

“I’ll get the first-aid kit to fix those cuts. Take the pills and drink that bottle of water, baby. I’m not going to ask you again.”

He turned and left the room and I sat there watching him retreat, hating the fact that I liked the endearment.

What was wrong with me that even after everything, my body still refused to catch up with my mind on the fact that this was a dangerous situation. This wasn’t the boy that I once loved. He was a murderer.

He was something far worse, I realized.

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CHAPTER

FIFTEEN

Ruin

When I came back into the room with the first-aid kit, I could tell she was going to give me problems. It was in the hard set of her features, the narrowing of her eyes.

Even after leaving her alone for a couple of minutes, she'd already played this scenario out in her head.

So I just stood there and watched her as I cocked my eyebrow. "Whatever bullshit you're about to do, just do it. The sooner we get your wounds cleaned up, the sooner I can tell you what's happened for the past ten years."

I saw a bit of shock cross her face. Her eyes widened, her lips parted. And then that anger slowly faded. Although she was a little spitfire, my girl, she also wanted to know what was happening more than she wanted to show me that I wasn't the one in control.

If I had any kind of emotions, that might've given me some amusement. As it was… it turned me on. The very idea of exerting dominance over her had my cock growing hard.

I walked closer to her and stopped at the edge of the bed, and was pleased when she didn't shy away. I knew deep down she knew I wouldn't hurt her.

And not just because I could've done it many times already and hadn't, but because her mind and body, although at war with each other, knew deep

down she'd always be safe with me.

Even if my visage looked like the beast before her.

We didn't speak for long minutes as I tended to the little scrapes and cuts on her body, as I washed the dirt from her limbs as gently as I could. My hands were too big though, my very DNA makeup fighting against doing anything soft.

Her legs were long and lean, toned from dancing over the years. And the shirt and shorts she wore did nothing to hide her figure.

My little ballerina.

I was cleaning off the soles of her feet when she finally broke the silence with her first question.

"Where have you been all these years?"

I didn't look into her face after that, not for several seconds as I let the sound of her voice soothe me from the inside out.

"You didn't even say goodbye."

I felt this pain in the center of my chest and absently rubbed the spot over my heart. "How much truth do you want, Ana?" I looked at her then, our gazes locked. She didn't answer at first, the hesitation clear on her face. "Because I'll give you all of it. I'll drown you in it if you want. But once it's out there's no taking it back, no pretending to know otherwise."

Long seconds passed with just heavy silence between us. It was clear she was mulling what I'd said over in that pretty head of hers.

She glanced down at her hands, twisted in her lap, before looking at me again. "I want to know it all. I want to know where you were, what you've been doing. I want to know why you look like this now. I want to know the truth, Kostya."

Hearing her say my given name would never get easier. I hadn't heard it for the past decade, but I liked it spilling from her lips, reminding me that I, at one time, could have been the hero instead of the villain.

"It takes a certain kind of bastard to be in the Bratva, to be a soldier in organized crime where money and power, killing and degradation all go hand in hand."

I kept my voice even and smooth, not wanting to be as crass or lewd as I should be speaking about the Russian mafia… especially about her father.

"You know the fucking world we live in. You're not immune to the ugliness, although you have been sheltered." God, she'd been sheltered,

with Vladimir doting on her and protecting her from a lot of the grittiness that he dealt in.

“I know my father isn’t a good man.” Her voice cut at the end, and I felt that pain in the center of my chest again. God, I hadn’t felt any kind of emotion in so long, not like this, not where it was wrong and I was wounded, and it felt like my insides were being dug out with bloody claws.

“I don’t think there is such a thing as a good man, Anastasia. I don’t think there has been for a very long time.” I curled my hands into tight fists and I saw the way she glanced down at them, her gaze moving over all the tattoos. I was covered from neck to ankle, marks and insignias, designs that spoke of my brutality, of the violence and abuse I’d been dealt. They hid a lot of who I was on the inside.

“Keep going,” she whispered.

“You know my father was a piece of shit. He was one of Vladimir’s loyal soldiers, willing to get as dirty as his Pakhan ordered.”

I thought back to growing up. My father didn’t know what love was. He knew how to deliver pain. His form of affection was using his fists. My birthday gifts, the holidays, anything special I was given bloody noses, black eyes, and bruises all over my body. All for the purpose of strengthening me, turning me into the monster I was now.

“I’m corrupted, sweetheart, created this way by my father for all those years growing up, molded by the men who surrounded you daily, who gave you sweet smiles and soft words all because you were the Pakhan’s innocent daughter.”

Her breath caught. “Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

I shook my head before she finished. “I never wanted that ugliness to touch you.”

“I would have helped you no matter what. I would have talked to my father, made them take care of you.”

I laughed humorlessly.

“I was hopeless. They started training me early.” At her confused look, I pressed on. “To kill, Anastasia. They trained me to be brutal, to fight without mercy. They wanted me to be a savage, their machine that would make them more money in the underground fighting circuit, and therefore give them more power.”

I could see the horror on her face as she stared at me, her shock evident. She didn’t want to believe it, but she did.

“That’s why they took you away? That’s where you went?” I could see the wetness start to form in the corners of her eyes, glossy like little diamonds.

“That’s why they took me.” I said it so matter-of-factly it sounded detached and cold enough she flinched.

“For a decade you’ve been—”

“—killing. I’ve been killing, Anastasia. Shamelessly.”

She was shaking her head before I even finished. “You’re not… you’re not Kostya.”

“I told you who I was. I haven’t been Kostya for a long time.”

She stayed silent for so long I wondered if she’d finally accepted the shock that had settled into her. But then she exhaled a shaky breath.

“Did you do something to Ivan?” Her voice was low.

I could still see how nervous she was, her anxiety surrounding her like a thick cloak. Her pupils were blown, and her chest was rising and falling faster than normal.

My girl was moments from freaking the fuck out.

God, she was the prettiest thing I’d ever seen. I didn’t deserve her, I was far too ugly on the inside and out to ever be good enough, but that wasn’t going to stop me from making sure everybody knew she was mine.

I wouldn’t sugarcoat anything, wouldn’t be gentle or easy as I told her what happened over the past ten years, and how I wasn’t the Kostya she once knew.

I wasn’t good for anyone or anything. I was only good at one particular task. Maiming. Killing. Just violence as a whole.

“Yes.” That one word came out of me as easily as taking in a breath. But if she wanted me to show any kind of remorse, any kind of guilt, it would never happen. I was no longer wired that way.

She glanced away and I saw the slender arch of her throat move as she swallowed. “Why?” When I didn’t answer right away she looked back at me.

“You know why.” I let those words hang between us. “And it has nothing to do with what a piece of shit Ivan really was.”

“I’m not yours.”

Something dark and deadly coiled inside of me when I heard her say that. It was as if poison had been slowly pushed into my veins. Drip, drip, drip like acid eating me away from the inside out.

Her words were so potent to me that I actually growled, which in turn had her pressing her back to the headboard as her fear manifested all around her.

I braced my palms on either side of her hips, leaned forward, and scented her, flaring my nostrils as I took in her scent. I was all up in her space, forcing her to hear me, see me, but especially feel me.

“You’ve been mine, Anastasia. You’ve been mine since the very beginning.” I heard her swallow, watched her pupils expand even more. “I won’t let anyone else have you. That’s why I killed Ivan. That’s why I killed Igor. They tried to make it so you were someone else’s.” I bared my teeth. “Your father is next.”

“You’re… insane.”

I pulled back and slowly shook my head. “I’m nothing. Not anymore. Don’t you understand, Ana?” I reached out and she flinched. I cupped her cheek, running my finger along her smooth skin. “I’m just a vessel for all the nastiness that’s in the world. All that hatred men have in their hearts.” I let go of her and held my hands out. “I am that ugliness manifested in its purest, purest form, baby.”

I stood and walked to the door, but when I heard her exhale, I stopped and looked over my shoulder.

“I’m not yours to keep.”

I turned slowly and grinned. “My sweet, naive girl. We both know that’s a lie.”

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CHAPTER

SIXTEEN

Anastasia

I’d gone through a lot of emotions in the very short time I’d been in Kostya’s presence.

I didn’t feel fear anymore. I knew he wouldn’t hurt me. He was too… possessive of me, as if he saw me as a piece of furniture, his possession.

He’d only been gone for five minutes before he returned with a sandwich and bag of chips, another bottle of water, and an apple.

I’d thought of chucking the damn fruit at his head, but the nausea had faded and I was hungry. I figured I needed my strength to deal with whatever was going to happen next.

He hadn’t come back in the room since dropping that stuff off, which felt like hours ago. After I’d eaten, all my energy came crashing down and I found myself falling asleep.

Now here I was, sitting on the edge of the bed after just using the bathroom and cleaning up. I stared out the window, the morning light slithering in. I heard a bird chirping somewhere close, and could practically smell the pine from the trees.

My anger that had been replaced by exhaustion was back with a vengeance.

My body ached fiercely, my feet were far too painful to even walk on, and I hated that I felt so damn helpless.

I looked at the closed bedroom door for what seemed like the millionth time, hearing the noise of Kostya rummaging around right on the other side,

but having ignored it all morning.

I stood and grimaced as the pain in the soles of my feet snaked up my legs. It was my own fault though. I'd run out into the night halfcocked and ready to escape, not thinking about anything or using common sense.

I looked down at the shirt I wore, plain and white. One of Kostya's. As soon as I'd woken and gotten cleaned up, I rummaged through his dresser. His pants were too big, so I opted for one of his T-shirts and a pair of thick socks.

He was such a large man that the sleeves went to my elbows, the hem to my knees, and the socks covered my calves.

I felt far more covered than when I was in my sleep shorts and tank. I stared at the bedroom door once more, my anger growing exponentially the longer I stood there and thought about everything.

I heard a couple pots and pans banging around, and gathering all that courage and strength, irritation and annoyance, I went over and opened the door, limping my way down the hallway to stand right at the entrance where the kitchen and living room opened up.

My breath caught for a second as I stared at Kostya. He stood by the sink filling up a glass of water. He was shirtless, his dark sweats hanging low on his hips. I was riveted at the sight of all that muscle on display. Every inch of his skin was covered in dark tattoos.

I stared at those two dimples that sat at the base of his spine. His muscles flexed even at the slightest movement, his bicep and forearm tightening as he brought the glass to his mouth and downed it in one breath. Then he set the glass on the counter and braced his hands on the edge of the sink, staring out the window.

Although he seemed utterly relaxed, the back of my neck tightened, tingled. He was fully aware I stood here.

"I made breakfast," he said in that deep voice of his that seemed a little huskier, as if he'd just woken up.

When I didn't answer, he looked over his shoulder and ran a hand over his hair, disheveling the short dark strands even more.

"I don't want your food." I tried to be strong but even I could hear it sounded as if I were throwing a temper tantrum. "I don't want anything from you." And as if my body wanted to betray me at that moment, my stomach made a noise of hunger, letting him know how much of a liar I was.

“Suit yourself.” He turned toward the stove and started bringing plates and pans over to the table. I saw he’d cooked eggs, bacon, and toast. I also smelled fresh brewed coffee. He sat down and started eating as if I weren’t even there, the morning paper spread out beside him.

I gritted my teeth as my hunger and annoyance grew.

“I can’t stay here. I have a life, a job, bills to pay.”

He ignored me, the bastard.

“What do you think will happen when you go back, sweetheart?” He wiped his mouth with the napkin and took a long pull from his coffee cup after he spoke.

“Live my damn life without being someone’s prisoner.” I tightened my hands into fists again. “You think I want to be shackled to someone my father picks for me? You think I want to be used as a power move?” I inhaled sharply. “You think I deserve to watch you murder a man right in front of me, then be drugged and kidnapped in the middle of the night and held against my will?”

I could feel my blood pressure rising dangerously high, so much so that I felt dizzy.

“Breathe, Ana.” His voice was calm and smooth, and for a second I felt myself start to climb back down.

But then I got annoyed all over again at the fact he could sit there all collected and calm, like he didn’t have a care in the world.

“You don’t have anywhere to be over the weekend.”

I opened my mouth to argue but he was right. The next two days I was free. I snapped my mouth shut.

No work, no other obligations. “It doesn’t matter what I do or don’t have to do. I have a life *not here*. With you.”

I couldn’t believe I’d held on to any kind of hope regarding the good things about Kostya. In ten years, he’d changed into this monster who was emotionless, violent… coldhearted.

I stared into his eyes and saw no recognition of the past between us. No feelings of remembrance about what we shared. And when he looked back at me, I didn’t see any of that either.

“I don’t plan on keeping you as a prisoner forever, Anastasia.”

I didn’t know why I believed him, but I felt a little bit of my annoyance take a step back.

“Keeping me here for one day against my will is just as bad.” He shrugged as if he didn’t care, as if it meant nothing to him.

Because he’d do whatever he wanted.

“So what?” I threw my hands in the air. “I’m stuck here for the next few days and then you’ll just let me go?”

He leaned back in the chair and crossed his arms over his chest, which caused the muscles in his upper body to flex with all that power.

“Until I kill your father, you’re not safe. That means, princess, you’re here until I make that a reality.”

My body tensed at the sound of Kostya saying he was going to kill my father.

I opened my mouth then closed it.

“That’s right.” He leaned forward and rested his forearms on the table. “I’m going to find Vladimir and cut out his heart.”

“All because he set me up with Ivan?” Confusion filled me. “Seems extreme.” I let my gaze move over his body. “Although, it seems you’re already at that point.” I snorted and crossed my arms, glaring at him.

“Truth is, I’d kill anyone who got in the way of you being mine. It wouldn’t take much, baby. Just a look of desire in their eyes aimed your way.” He slowly shook his head, his expression turning frightening. “But Vladimir has a lot of marks against him, more than could ever be paid with blood in a lifetime.”

I found myself taking a step back on instinct.

“The fact you thought I’d just leave you still hurts the more I think about it, sweetheart.” His jaw clenched. “Your father was the one who did it all, Anastasia. He’s the one who organized the fight clubs, the training.”

The more he spoke, the harder his voice grew.

“Your father was the one who sent me away at the age of fifteen.”

“But your father—”

“—was nothing but a foot soldier. A lap dog.”

My heart thundered painfully in my chest.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, those two words spilling out of me as tears streamed down my cheeks.

I shook my head as I heard the truth in his words, as I felt them deep in my heart.

“He’d told me…” I closed my eyes. “He told me fatherly things to comfort me when he’d been the cause of my pain.” I opened my eyes and

took another step back. My father created this… this… whoever I stared at.

“You need to realize I’m not going to let you fucking go, not in the sense that you will ever be anyone else’s.”

So many emotions bombarded me, and I knew I was going to lash out at Kostya even though he didn’t deserve all of it.

The hatred I felt over what he told me about my father was so strong I couldn’t think or breathe.

Before I could stop myself, I let a harsh sound leave me. “Why? Why are you doing any of this to me? It’s been ten years and zero contact. You haven’t reached out to me once even though you’re admitting you watched me, and could have spoken to me a hundred different times over the years?” I was screaming, my face feeling hot, my heart racing.

I didn’t realize I’d moved closer, and I was only a few feet from him now, screaming, my hands tightly curled into fists, this anger I felt making it seem as if I were at my strongest.

“You say I’m yours, yet for a decade you let me think you’d just left when we could have been together.” I was panting and held my place as he slowly stood, as he walked closer.

I refused to let him intimidate me.

“You let me wonder—think—you’d died.” I was crying now, big, angry fat tears that pissed me off even more.

“You’re being dramatic,” he hissed out.

“God,” I screamed. “I hate you.” I went to turn away, wanting to get far from him because I was so upset and hurt and just wanted to lash out.

He gripped my arm and forcefully turned me around.

“You don’t hate me.” He was so close now the heat from his body caused beads of sweat to dot my brow.

“Let go of me, you asshole.” I lifted my free hand and slapped him across the face. My palm stung but, God, it felt good.

“Go on,” he roared. “Hurt me. Give me your pain. Make me bleed if it’ll ease that anger and hurt I caused.” Our faces were so close now as he kept roaring out.

“I hate you,” I screamed so loud my throat became raw.

“You don’t hate me,” he growled. “I couldn’t stand it if you did.” His chest rose and fell hard, as if he ran a marathon.

He gripped my wrist and brought my hand to his face again, forcing me to slap him. Then he raked my nails down his chest so hard I watched in

horror as blood started to well from the marks.

“Stop,” I cried out. “Stop it.” I shook my head. “Why are you doing this? Why are you like this?”

“You need to come to the realization that I’m completely fucking infatuated with you.”

His words had everything in me stalling. We both panted harshly, roughly. “Let me go,” I said through gritted teeth. “I’m not doing this with you.” His hold on my wrist tightened as he used his body to push me backward until the wall stopped our movements.

Kostya slammed his free hand on the wall beside my head, then lifted my arm he held and pressed it to the wall. He caged me in, and I narrowed my eyes on him.

“I’m not afraid of you, so back the hell up.”

“You should be fucking afraid of me.” He was so close now our noses nearly touched. “But you’re not because you know why.”

My chest was rising and falling hard and fast. I didn’t answer.

“Say it.”

“There’s nothing to say.”

He smirked but it was anything but pleasant. “Say. It.”

I leaned forward that last small space until our lips lightly brushed, but this wasn’t about pleasure. I was pissed and wanted to hurt someone as much as I hurt.

“There’s. Nothing. To. Say.”

We didn’t speak for long seconds, our gazes locked, breathing harsh and identical.

And then he slammed his mouth on mine, and I was so shocked for a moment I stood there frozen. I felt my eyes widen and the breath stalled in my lungs.

He growled against my mouth, “Fucking kiss me back. I know you want to, baby.”

I made a frustrated sound, but it only had him kiss me harder. And when he swiped his tongue along the seam of my mouth, I gasped, opening for him so he plunged inside, stroking me from the inside out.

He tasted better than anything I could have ever imagined, more addictive than I’d ever fantasized. I softened for him, against him, this embarrassingly pleasure-filled noise leaving me.

“That’s it. That’s my good girl,” he murmured against my lips, slipping his tongue back inside, pressing his chest to mine, flattening me to the wall. “Now give me more. Give it all to me.”

I was helpless to stop this, not when it felt too good. I tentatively touched my tongue to his and he groaned in pleasure.

“That’s it. Be my good girl and give me more.”

A shocked sound of breath left me when he pressed his lower body full-on against mine, the massive erection he sported digging into me. He ground himself over and over on my belly, making me feel how hard and thick he was. For me.

“Tell me how beautiful you are.”

I moaned and hated myself for it.

“Tell me how much you mean to me. Tell me how fucking obsessed I am with you.” He let go of my wrist and curled his hand around my throat. He broke the kiss and ran his tongue along the side of my mouth as he whispered, “Tell me you know I’ll fucking kill anyone who lays a finger on you.”

I closed my eyes and let my head fall back on the wall, just letting myself feel this. I hadn’t felt good in so long… since he had left, since I was alone.

“I want you to say those things over and over again, and only then will I fuck you.”

He went back to kissing me, and my pussy was so wet that my panties were soaked. My clit throbbed in time with my pulse, but it was his words that were like cold, frigid water on my arousal.

I placed my hands on his chest and pushed with all my strength. He growled and for a second kept kissing me, but then moved back, his head lowered as he stared at me with eyes that looked completely black from his desire.

I glanced down to see how hard he was, his cock like a thick, long steel rod behind his sweats, tenting the material obscenely.

For a second I gathered my control, told my libido to take a back seat and stop being a greedy bitch. Then I looked at him and narrowed my eyes.

“Fucking me, *Kostya,* is something you won’t ever do.” And then I turned and went back to the bedroom, slamming the door shut and telling myself I didn’t want him coming after me.

I really didn’t. Right?

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CHAPTER

SEVENTEEN

Ruin

I’d waited until she’d gone to sleep before I left the house.

The entire day Anastasia had stayed in the room, only coming out when her hunger got too great. She wanted to hate me, but I could look in her eyes and see that she didn’t.

I felt it in the way she trembled right before she softened for me. I tasted it in the way she kissed me, heard it in the way she moaned as I obscenely ground my hard cock into her belly.

She didn’t hate me. She loved me, even if she’d never admit it, not even to herself.

But then I thought about her looking me in the eyes with all that fire burning around her, screaming that she hated me, and I felt my rage grow. I felt a pain unlike anything I’d ever experienced before. It encompassed me.

I couldn’t bear for her to feel that way toward me. She was the only good thing in my miserable fucking life.

I didn’t want to leave her, but I had to find out what was being said about Ivan’s death and Anastasia disappearing.

So I forced myself to leave the house, making sure the security was all in place, the cameras up and working, and the sensors on so that if they were tripped I’d be notified instantly on my phone.

She thought it was to keep her prisoner, and maybe that was part of it… keeping her as mine. I did get sick satisfaction in knowing she was sleeping in my bed and wearing my clothes. But it was also about making sure she was safe.

Because if Vladimir got hold of her, he'd make sure she was taken far away and then sold off to the highest bidder.

Even after I left, I sat in my vehicle for a good ten minutes making sure she was well and truly asleep. Because my girl was smart and resilient. She was strong and would try to escape again despite the fact her feet were torn up to hell, and she was safest with me.

But I'd forced myself to leave and was now walking through Yama. If I was going to hear anything through the rumor mill it would be here, where the drinks never stopped flowing, the drugs were plenty, and everyone was fucking high from the fights happening underground.

People steered clear of me, the ones who sensed the menace that surrounded me, knowing by the look in my eyes that I got pleasure from hurting others. And the ones who didn't know my reputation… well, they knew a predator when they saw one.

I curled my lip in disgust as I looked around the packed floor, smelling alcohol, the sweet tinge of cigar smoke in the air. I was sure deals were being made, drugs being sold, sex being bartered.

And underneath the upper level of Yama, I knew it was packed, sweating bodies gyrating and shouting, blood lust in their eyes as they stared at the erected cage and watched two men beat the ever-loving shit out of each other until one of them died.

That was my domain.

That was my home.

Or at least it had been for a very long time, a temporary solution to the emptiness I felt.

But that hollowness had faded the moment I brought Anastasia with me, slipped into my bed, and covered her with my blankets.

I shook my head, ridding my thoughts of her. She had no place in a piece-of-shit establishment like this, where she'd be eaten alive and tossed aside.

I saw all of these bodies as nothing but livestock, bags of flesh that meant absolutely nothing to me and were as disposable as throwing out the fucking trash.

I kept to the shadows, listening, watching, taking in everyone's body language. When people drank, their mouths got loose and their arrogance rose.

“He’s going fucking ballistic. Taking anyone who was within a five-mile radius of her apartment that night.” One of them spoke in Russian.

I slowed as I overheard a group of men talking in one of the far corners, the Russian loud, arrogant, and definitely slurred from too much drink.

“It had to have been someone on the inside,” said one of the men who had the first few buttons of his shirt undone, his tie haphazardly crooked across his neck, and a willowy blonde sitting on top of his lap, who appeared to want to be anywhere else but there.

“Da. *There’s no way someone could’ve gotten in unless they knew the ins and outs of Vladimir’s security.”*

“Whoever it was has balls of steel.” The men all started laughing. *“Balls that are soon to be in a jar sitting atop his desk.”* The laughing became louder and I moved closer.

“I heard he captured a couple men last night, cut off a few digits, even one of their tongues. Vladimir slapped it between two slices of white bread and made him eat it.” The whole table lifted up their shots of vodka, saluting *Na Zdorovie,* and then tossing them back before slamming the glasses back on the table.

“Can you fucking imagine? Being forced to eat your own tongue. How does that even work? How does he chew?”

Another round of laughter.

I wasn’t surprised that Vladimir was resorting to cutting off fingers and tongues for not getting the information he wanted.

“I hope whoever took her is having a fun time with her.”

I ground my teeth and stared at the bastard who spoke.

“I know what I’d do if I had her.”

One of the men smacked the other one on the back in good humor, all of their grins ear-to-ear, their sick perversions on display.

“I bet her pussy is tighter than a vise and tastes like spun sugar.” His voice was slurred and his laughter too loud. *“Her tits are too small and she’s built without curves, but that cunt’s gonna strangle a cock.”*

The fucker’s confidence was going to get him killed.

“*When they are cold bitches like that one, thinking they are too good for everyone else, you know the fucking will be good ’cause they’ll fight back*.”

That was all I had to hear, some piece of shit saying nasty things about my Anastasia, and a switch inside of my brain was flipped on.

I watched him for the rest of the night, stood in the shadows as he tossed down shot after shot.

And then when he left, stumbling out the front and making his way around to the alley, I followed close behind, being stealthy and quiet.

It wouldn't matter if he knew I was coming because his death would be painful regardless.

I could have easily taken him out in this abandoned alley. No witnesses. Just snap his neck and let his body rot until the smell became too much.

But I wanted him to look me in the eyes as I killed him for uttering Anastasia's name, for insulting her and saying fucked-up shit about what was mine.

And I'd do that with the streetlights illuminating the gore I'd deliver and the possibility of someone seeing us out here in the open.

Because it was more thrilling when the hunter was being watched.

He reached into his coat pocket, and I could hear the sound of his keys jangling. Then he started humming an old Russian song I remembered, one that I'd heard plenty of times when the spectators of my fights would sling back shots of vodka as they celebrated their victories.

There was a streetlight right beside his car, muted piss-yellow coloring washing over the vehicle.

He stumbled toward it, leaning against the driver's side as he tried to unlock it. I reached him before he could unlock the door, standing just a foot from him, smelling the stench of sweat and booze pouring off of his greasy body.

He was a foot shorter than me, and heavily overweight. I didn't know who he was, but I could assume he was higher ranking in the Bratva. He wouldn't last ten minutes out in the streets as a foot soldier, not with that physique.

I noticed the moment the piece of shit realized I stood right behind him. His shoulders tightened and he straightened, as much as he could given his inebriated state.

He tried to play it cool, starting to whistle that Russian song as he reached into his coat pocket, presumably for his gun.

I wanted to drag this out, to make him suffer because he dared utter Anastasia's name on his tongue. But I wanted to get back to her. I wanted to let her know that I'd take care of everything, make sure it was safe so that she never had to worry about being used as a pawn again.

I pulled out my hunting knife, reached around and wrapped my forearm around his barrel chest, and jerked him back against me.

He fought for a second, his stocky build making him feel like a bag of bricks.

But I was fast. I'd been killing all my life.

So I brought that blade across his neck, opening up his throat and seeing his life-force spray across the driver's side window of his car.

I took a step back from him, wiping my blade on his coat before sheathing it again. He turned and faced me, his eyes widening when he realized who stood behind him.

His hands were up by his throat as he tried to close the wound, gasping and gurgling, blood spilling out of his mouth.

His ruddy face was sweaty, mixing with the red viscous fluid. He bled out faster than I thought he would, but then again his veins were also filled with alcohol, his blood thin because of it.

When he lay at my feet as nothing but a corpse, I spit on him then turned and left, heading back to my girl.

I didn't give two shits who Vladimir tortured or killed to get information on where Anastasia was, and no matter how careful I was someone—a neighbor possibly—might have seen me leave with her. Igor might have called in backup before I snapped his neck.

It was only a matter of time before Vladimir got a morsel of information he needed, like a bloodhound with a scent.

And I'd be ready. Ready to kill him not only for the hell and horror he put me through, but kill him to protect Anastasia.

I thought back to my girl sleeping in my bed, covered in my shirt… smelling like me.

I wondered what she'd think if she knew I killed a man simply for insulting her honor.

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CHAPTER

EIGHTEEN

Anastasia

I wasn’t sure what woke me at first, but when I felt movement behind me, my head still in that foggy, dreamlike state, I realized I wasn’t alone in bed.

I should’ve felt instant fear instead of the calmness that settled over me when a strong, heavy arm wrapped around my middle.

I shouldn’t have sighed at the feel of his warmth when I was pulled back against an impossibly hard chest.

And I especially shouldn’t have felt any kind of pleasure when I heard Kostya’s deep voice rumble against my hair, his words indistinguishable because I was still in that sleepy state where I wasn’t fully awake.

I could smell soap and shampoo covering him, the same ones I used before I slipped into bed and wanted to dream this entire day away.

His skin was warm, and I closed my eyes, taking in the undertones of Kostya’s true scent.

That wild, spicy smell that reminded me of so much. The pleased sound I made embarrassed me, but I knew he understood where it came from. I knew he liked it because he pulled me even closer, my back to his chest, my bottom to his groin.

I could feel how hard he was; I knew I should push him away, scream at Kostya and yell at him not to touch me, but the truth was I missed him.

I’d missed him so damn much that it made me want to cry right now.

I just wanted to pretend this was our reality, that we weren’t in some fucked-up version of something we could never change.

For long moments we just lay there, with the feel of his fingers brushing over my wrist, then moving along each of my fingers.

I could've fallen asleep like that if not for the wet heat I felt between my thighs, or the fact his cock seemed to throb against my lower back, incessant and huge.

I didn't want to like this softer side of him, where I could pretend he wasn't a killer and keeping me prisoner.

But I was so tired and not in the literal sense. To be honest, this was the first time I'd been out of my father's reach, where I didn't have his soldiers watching over me.

I may have lived alone, but I had enough eyes on me, and a security setup thanks to my father, I never felt like I had privacy.

But I felt that now and it was liberating.

It was also distracting and infuriating. Kostya made me feel things I'd never experienced before, an arousal that sucked the air from my lungs and had all common sense and rationalization leaving me.

"I'm not going to let anyone or anything ever hurt you again." The deep tones of his voice had more weight lifting from me, and I let it all go.

I closed my eyes and wet my lips before opening them again and stared at the window.

Of course I tried opening it again and again while I'd been stuck in the room all day. I'd looked for any tools I could use to scrape away the paint and pry the damn thing open.

I'd looked for any furniture I could lift and easily break the glass. But by then I was exhausted and mentally worn down.

There was always tomorrow, I'd told myself.

"And what if you're the one hurting me?" I whispered in response to his statement.

He was silent for long seconds, still petting me while intermittently scenting my hair, which was still damp from my own shower.

"You know I'd never hurt you." His reply was low and soft and I didn't respond because… I knew this to be true.

Even after all these years and my current situation, I knew this was the truth.

"I like that you wear my things." He moved his hand to my hip and slid his fingers back and forth over the white T-shirt I'd slipped on before going to bed.

I felt especially bare seeing as I didn’t have any panties or bras here with me, something I’d have to demand he rectify.

“I stopped by your place and grabbed some of your things, figured you’d want them, although I much prefer you like this.” He scented my hair again and I suppressed a shiver. “All vulnerable and smelling like me.”

It took a second to let his words sink in, and when they did, I glanced over my shoulder at him.

“You stopped by my place to get my things?”

Kostya lifted a hand and played with a strand of my hair. I should have smacked him away and told him to fuck off, yet I liked the feel when his fingers gently brushed against the side of my neck.

“I did. It was harder said than done seeing as your father has his little bitches watching the place.” He leaned in and kept staring in my eyes. “But I figured you’d want your stuff. Toothbrush, lotions, maybe something else…”

For a second I wasn’t sure what he meant and then when it clicked, I felt my heart beat overtime. *My necklace.*

“As much as you hate me,” he whispered in Russian. *“I can’t deny you anything, can’t stand to see you upset*, malishka.” *Baby.*

I wanted to be pissed at him even more for saying all these things, for making me feel anything but hatred toward him. But he spoke to me so intimately. He spoke to me like he used to. Like he cared.

I shifted slightly, but the way I was positioned made it so I pretty much had to stay pressed to him.

But I couldn’t deny he felt good.

He leaned down and nuzzled the side of my throat, which shouldn’t have felt as good as it did.

It should’ve pissed me off more that I was reacting this way, but I clearly had no control over my body. Instead all I felt was a burning desire that was so new and foreign to me that I never wanted it to end.

“Why don’t you say thank you, sweetheart?”

I faced back forward and closed my eyes, biting my lip hard enough it stung. “How about you go fuck yourself.”

He chuckled and groaned. “Keep biting back, sweetheart. It turns me on.”

When I felt him run his tongue along the shell of my ear, I shivered.

“You’re the only one who has ever stood up against me once I became the monster I am.” He dragged his tongue down the side of my neck, lapping at my pulse point. “Never realized how fucking hot it was for you to fight me.”

My pussy throbbed in time with my heart beating.

“So tell me. Tell me how you’d lie in bed at night and touch yourself…”

I was *not* about to tell him any of that, especially how I used my vibrator, how I thought about him every time I got myself off. I looked over my shoulder as realization spread through me as he slowly smiled all satisfied-like. My mortification rose tenfold. *He knows about my vibrator.*

“Come on, sweetheart. Just describe how you’d lie there in the dark, pretty, lean thighs spread wide, and fingers buried in your cunt as you played with yourself.”

I shook my head and held in my moan. I clenched my teeth as I felt him start to run slow circles over my hip again. Over and over again, the material of the shirt slowly slipped up. Up. Up.

But I couldn’t find the strength to stop him.

“Tell me what you thought about,” Kostya murmured, his lips pressed to the side of my neck.

It was such an intimate yet innocent touch that I grew wetter. Those two warring touches seemed to go against everything he stood for, he embodied.

I exhaled the shuddering breath but still didn’t respond, which had a low, deep chuckle leaving him. It wasn’t a sound of amusement, but one that told me he was enjoying this a little too much.

He was definitely getting off on me defying him.

“I’m not going to tell you anything.” In my head, those words sounded fiercer then they actually were when I spoke. He made a noncommittal noise in the back of his throat, still rubbing his thumb back and forth over my hip bone.

“*Krasavitsa,*” he murmured. *Beauty.* “You don’t have to tell me anything. My imagination is pretty fucking vivid.”

I closed my eyes at his lewd words, at his profanity. Why was that turning me on? I was so wet, so slippery that my inner thighs were slick because of my arousal. God, I was naked underneath his shirt. No panties, no bra.

How could I be so stupid? I literally had no barrier, no defenses under this thin cotton. But there were only so many times a girl could wear the

same bra and panties, and mine were currently drying in the bathroom after I washed them out in the sink.

“Come on, Anastasia. Be my good girl and tell me how you’d slip your fingers between your legs and press them to your clit until you came.”

The sound that came out of me was shocking, but not as much as the feeling of my inner muscles clenching, as if they were desperate for something substantial to grip on to.

“Admit you thought of me the whole time… every time you came.” He rocked against me. Back and forth. Back and forth.

I swore he was thicker, which seemed impossible since he already felt massive.

“You feel this?” He rolled his hips and I let out a startled gasp. “This is all for you.” He ran his teeth along the shell of my ear before gently biting the lobe. “You feel how hard I am?” He thrust his cock forward. “I’m so fucking hard for you.”

He moved his hand over my hip, down my belly, and stopped right below my navel. The shirt still covered me, stopping high on my thighs, but right now I felt so naked. I should tell him to stop. I really, really should.

“If I’m this hard, I wonder how wet you are for me.”

I bit my lip again, so hard I felt a flash of pain as the tender skin opened up.

“Did you know,” he murmured as he moved his hand lower… and lower still. He gripped the hem of my shirt and I, in return, curled my fingers into the blanket, using it as some kind of anchor. “That I’ve never thought of another female but you? Not once, sweetheart.”

He pulled the shirt up and my breath caught at the feel of his fingers skating along the top of my thighs, and at the heat in his words.

“Did you know, I’ve never kissed anyone, touched anyone… fucked anyone.”

Another moan left me.

“You’re the only one I’ve ever wanted. You’re the only person I care about, the only part of my humanity that is left.”

He rolled his hips, pushing that massive length against my ass at the same time he shoved the shirt all the way up so the material rested right below my breasts.

“God,” he groaned. “I want to feel you, want to feel how hot and wet, how tight and *mine* you are.”

“Just because this feels good and I’m letting it happen doesn’t mean I think it’s anything more than that.” I let a soft sound of ecstasy leave me when he dug his fingers into the skin of my bare hip.

He jerked me back against that thick length between his thighs, his sweats doing nothing to form a barrier between us.

“This doesn’t mean anything,” I whisper-moaned, as if trying to convince myself of that fact.

He ground his erection against my ass again, and I bit my lip hard enough I tasted the metallic tang of blood. He nipped at the side of my throat hard, and a gasp of pain spiked in me, which led to more pleasure.

“This means everything.” I heard his breath hitch. “No panties,” he said almost idly. “You’re fucking killing me, baby.”

God, my inner thighs were so slick when I moved them together they slid back and forth almost obscenely.

“My good girl. You please me so much it drives me fucking crazy.” He gripped my wrist, pried my fingers away from the blanket, and slowly moved our conjoined hands down between our bodies so my palm now covered that throbbing, hard cock.

His sweats seemed ultra-thin given the fact I swore I felt every hard, throbbing inch of him. I shamelessly curled my fingers around the girth, as much as I could. He grunted and pushed himself further into my hold.

“When I fell for you, the entire world cracked open from the impact.”

My heart was pounding so hard it hurt, his words so open and raw that I actually felt tears prick in the corners of my eyes.

“Let me touch you.”

I almost told him he was touching me, but I knew what he meant. Because it was what I wanted, too.

When I didn’t say anything, he must have taken that as consent—which it totally was—because I was pulled onto my back with Kostya hovering over me.

“Let me taste you.” He leaned in and nosed the hair away from my neck so he could lick and suck at the flesh, gently nibble on it until I found my hands on his shoulders… keeping him close.

When I didn’t answer, he pulled back to look down at me.

“Let me lick this little pussy,” he said with a deep, serenely heated voice.

I couldn’t speak, my throat was so tight, the air freezing in my lungs.

Kostya leaned in. Our lips were so close that I felt his warm, whiskey-scented breath. “I’m fucking starved for you.”

My breath hitched and I shook my head. “No, we shouldn’t do this.” *Yes, God, yes we should.*

His expression was dark and serious as he slowly moved down my body, pushing my shirt up my chest so my breasts were bared to the chilled air.

“You want me to do this, don’t you.” He didn’t phrase it like a question.

“I don’t.” The lie came easily to me.

“Liar,” he murmured.

While holding my gaze with his, he slid his palms over the tops of my thighs and down to my knees. He gently pulled my legs apart, and a soft gust of air left me.

His hands were hard and firm as he pressed them against my inner thighs, keeping me open, spread to his obscene, intent gaze.

“Ask for it,” he demanded.

“No.” God, it turned me on to defy him, probably as much as it aroused him to have me fight back.

This was a sick game, but one I didn’t want to stop.

One of his dark eyebrows cocked up and he finally broke eye contact to look at the most intimate part of me he exposed.

“Look at how bare you are.”

I closed my eyes as goose bumps formed along my arms and legs.

“I bet you like it waxed because you wear those little leotards. Isn’t that right, *krasavitsa*.”

I bit my lip to stop myself from answering him, from agreeing with him.

“I bet this tight, pretty little cunt gets ultra-sensitive when you play with it because there isn’t any hair.”

I couldn’t hold in the moan that spilled from me, and the sound that left him in response was one of approval.

Oh, God… the image those words conjured.

“Look at me.” His voice was hard and demanding and brooked no argument.

And when I did open my eyes, obeying him before I realized I was doing it, the expression on his face was positivity feral.

“I’m going to lick this little cunt, and you’re going to lie back and take it like a good girl.” His fingers dug into my flesh as if cementing his words.

“You’re going to come for me because you want to please me, because you know your orgasm will make me feel good.”

He kept tightening his hands on my thighs so hard the pleasure and pain started to morph into one.

“Yes,” I whispered before I knew I was giving him exactly what he wanted, but right then and there I didn’t want to deny him. I wanted to feel good, to picture the man between my legs as the only person I’d ever truly loved. I could close my eyes and just envision another time, another place, where Kostya was that sweet, protective boy I once knew.

“Don’t you fucking close your eyes.”

I snapped them open and stared at him.

“You stay right here with me. You look at me and know who’s about to eat out your pussy, who’s about to ruin you for anyone else.”

With his gaze still locked on mine, I watched in shocked awe and embarrassed arousal as he spit on my pussy and buried his face between my thighs before another word could be uttered.

He licked and sucked at me, ate me out until all I could do was grip the sheets beside me and hold on.

“Come on, be my good girl.”

My heart raced at his words. They were strange and foreign to me, never something I thought would turn me on, but here I was… getting wetter because of those words.

“So sweet.” His voice was muffled against my soaked flesh. He pulled back enough that a string of saliva still connected us.

While still holding my gaze, he spit on my pussy again. Then faster than I could anticipate, Kostya lifted his hand and slapped me between my legs.

My back arched on its own, my nipples tightened, and the cry that left me was part pain, part pleasure. I was close, so close to climaxing, and I knew it would blow all the other orgasms I’d given myself out of the water.

“Look at how sloppy wet your cunt is for me.” He went back to sucking on my clit but stopped right before I went over the edge.

I felt him tease my opening, gently probing without actually penetrating.

“I can tell how tight you are. You’ve never had a man in you, have you?” He gave my pussy a long lick, then flicked his tongue over my clit. “I know you haven’t because anytime I saw a fucker showing interest, I made sure they never spoke to you again.”

His words were fuzzy in my head, and I thought back to the few platonic “dates” I’d had in the past, ones that I never pursued, but then again the guys never reached out to see me again either.

Now I know why.

“You’re crazy—”

“—for you, Anastasia. I’m fucking crazy for you.”

He buried his face in my pussy again, licking, lapping up my arousal that spilled from my opening and slipped down the crease of my ass.

“Tell me how good that feels.”

I gasped for air, and before I could answer he was slapping my pussy again and again, over and over.

“Go on. Tell me how good it feels, sweetheart.”

I arched my neck and moaned. I was so close. “Yes,” I all but cried.

“Tell me how beautiful you are to me. Tell me you know how much you mean to me.”

“W-what?”

He spit on my pussy again and gave it a gentler slap this time, but one that still pulled a moan from me.

“I’m not going to let you come until you say the words. I want to hear you tell me how gorgeous you are, how perfect and soft, sweet. You’re going to tell me that you know you’re too good for me, but you know how much I fucking want you so you’re not going anywhere.”

Another slap. Another lick. Another suck.

“Go on, sweet girl. Tell me and I’ll let you soar.”

I felt tears slipping out the corners of my eyes as the pleasure kept rising and rising until there was nowhere else for it to go except explode out of me.

I didn’t want to say those things, words that I never associated with myself, ones that would feel weird and off coming from my lips. Kostya kept encouraging me to give him this because it would please him so much to hear.

“Yes, yes, I’m beautiful and perfect and too good for you, but I’m not going anywhere because you make me feel so good.”

You make me feel alive and free.

He was hovering above me so suddenly that a shocked sound left me, my body teetering on the edge of orgasm.

I wanted to scream at him, to grab his head and thrust him back between my thighs to finish what he started, but the look on his face had anything and everything that I could've said stopping right on the tip of my tongue.

He slid his hand up between my breasts so he could curl his fingers around my throat, tightening his hold ever so slightly so that my breath hitched.

Then he leaned in and brushed his lips across mine, dragging his tongue over them. He ground out, "That's fucking right. You're all those things. You're mine."

He kissed me brutally, as if scarring me with that truth. He plunged his tongue into my mouth so that I tasted myself on him. I found myself moaning and sucking on the muscle, drawing it further in.

I spread my thighs wider and lifted up, feeling the firm length of his erection pressing against my soft slit. I had no doubt that when he pulled away there was a wet spot from my pussy on his sweats.

He pulled back, bit my bottom lip hard enough I cried out, and then he was licking it away, soothing the sting as he moved back down and buried his face between my thighs.

"Give it to me," he groaned. "Give it all to me."

Kostya sucked on my clit at the same time he teased my pussy opening with the pad of his finger. I couldn't hold off the orgasm any longer.

I exploded for him, mewling, and was pretty sure I said his name in the process.

I floated away, but I didn't care if I ever reached land again.

This feeling was too intense, too soul-sucking, breath-stealing… conscious-consuming that I never wanted it to end.

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CHAPTER

NINETEEN

Ruin

I held her for a long time after she fell asleep, refusing to let her go, loving the way she softened in my arms and… trusted me with her safety despite how heinous I was.

Despite having kidnapped her.

And then I'd slipped out of bed and had to take another shower, one under a frigid spray of water as I jerked off so violently I hadn't been able to hold in the bark of sound that left me as I came harder than I ever had before.

Sleep had eluded me. Then again, I was used to living off a few hours a night at most.

When you're trained to be a killer, your "handlers" kept you weak and on edge, like a starving dog before a fight.

And now my body was programmed this way.

I ran a hand over the back of my head and felt the blood rush through my veins. Despite my second shower, I still smelled her on my skin, tasted her on my tongue.

I wanted nothing more than to go back in the bedroom, crawl in beside her, and spread her legs as I sank in deep.

God, my cock throbbed despite coming just an hour before.

I focused on the gun I was cleaning to try and clear my head. I was so intent on keeping my mind clear that I didn't hear Anastasia leave the bedroom, didn't even sense her standing on the other side of the table until I looked up and saw her.

For a moment, I was shocked at myself. Never had I been taken off guard, not in the past ten years, at least. I was always on point with my surroundings, taking in every single detail, not missing anything.

I had to be completely focused if I was going to survive. But this slip of a girl, this beautiful, perfect creature who looked at me with sleepy eyes, disheveled hair, and who still wore my T-shirt, was rewiring my brain.

I didn't know if I liked that, if it terrified me, or if I wanted her to keep doing whatever witchcraft she was doing to make me feel absolutely fucking insane.

I expected her to lash out at me, to start arguing, pick a fight over last night, to continue our arguing match that we shared before we both broke down and gave in to the physical aspect of being near.

What I didn't expect was for her to pull the chair out and sit down, smooth her hands on her hair, and look at me as if she were utterly exhausted and it had nothing to do with needing more sleep.

"Will you tell me more of what they did to you? I'm trying to understand how we got here."

I leaned back in my chair, ran a hand over my jaw, and exhaled wearily. I didn't want to tell her any of this, didn't want her to experience my horrors even if it was secondhand.

But if she wanted to know some of it, if she wanted to know the CliffsNotes of the man that I'd become, the monster who sat across from her, then I'd tell her what she needed to hear to understand why I would destroy her father… and why she was mine.

~

I SUCKED in a painful breath as the frigid water pelted against my already abused, naked skin. The man holding the industrial hose laughed before shutting it off, only giving me a second to catch my breath.

At eighteen years old I'd been in the Bratva's official "training program" for the better part of a year. Although they'd been beating the shit out of me for far longer than that.

And although I was being conditioned to be stronger, fiercer, and to have any empathy and humanity stripped from me, they couldn't take it all yet.

They might be able to make me stop feeling pain, stop having feelings, but I was still clinging to those last pieces of my emotions, those last bits of hope of who I was in my former life.

They sprayed me again and again, the water so powerful it left bruises on my battered body.

"That's enough," one of my "handlers" said in Russian.

His voice was thick and harsh, sounding like he'd been smoking for the last twenty years.

"Put him back in his room and toss him some bread for dinner."

The water was shut off, and I immediately sank to my knees. I stared at the white tile beneath me, my blood mixing with the water and swirling down the drain in the center of the floor.

A cloth was tossed at me, and I gripped it in my torn-up knuckles as I braced my other palm on the ground and pushed up.

Every part of me roared out in pain, with jagged wounds on my back, my kidneys bruised from the numerous punches I took day in and day out, and my skin opened up in long slices from the knives during the countless fights.

But I was still alive, could still feel my heart beating in my chest, could feel the air moving through my lungs.

…could still picture her in my mind.

So I wasn't completely lost, not yet, but I knew it was coming. I knew they would strip every part of who I was until I was exactly who they wanted.

Razoreniye.

The handler came forward to haul me back to my cell, but the look I gave him had the bastard freezing then taking a step back. They all saw what I did to others who came at me.

I stumbled to my cell, and when the heavy metal door was closed behind me, I sank down on my pallet of dirty fucking blankets, looked at the two slices of bread and questionably brown-looking water, and tossed them aside to collapse forward.

I lay there for several minutes, my eyes heavy, my body growing more painful the longer I lay there and my bones settled, my muscles relaxed.

I was seconds from drifting off to sleep, when the sound of an airhorn blasted through the speaker that was mounted in the corner of my cell.

My eyes snapped open and I groaned, rolling onto my back and staring at the stone ceiling, the wire-covered fluorescent light too bright, the sound of the electricity moving through my body until it felt like my skin was about to peel off.

The metal door opened, the hinges creaking, the sound of heavy boots stepping in causing me to look to the side.

Abram, the worst of my handlers, stepped in, a sadistic grin on his face as he held a cattle prod.

"Rise and shine, pretty boy. Time to play the game of how many times can you stay upright when I use the hot stick on you."

I pushed myself up and stood, but Abram was on me right away, jabbing the end of the cattle prod into my side until I roared out. On instinct, I swiped out and clocked the fucker in the calf.

He grunted and jabbed the prod into the side of my neck. It felt like I seized.

And he kept doing that over and over again until I couldn't stand up any longer.

Until I lost his sick fucking game.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY

Anastasia

“Abram was the first one I killed.”

I replayed the last thing Kostya said to me after he told me one of the many stories from after he was taken, and what had played out for him over the last ten years.

I swiped at my cheek, brushing away an errant tear as I thought about the horrors and abuse he endured.

“He was the first but he wasn’t the last. I hunted every one of those fuckers who hurt me and I made them suffer. And I’ve been killing for the last decade and reveling in it.”

Squeezing my eyes shut brought a sting of pain and a fresh wave of tears.

After he told me the last story from when he was taken, one where they used a whip against his bare back until he hadn’t even been able to stay conscious, until his skin had been peeled from him like taking it easily off a potato, I’d begged him to not tell me anymore. And that, in itself, felt so selfish. Because a part of me felt like if Kostya had to suffer through it then so should I.

After that, he’d stepped outside and I’d been holed up in the bedroom ever since.

And now I knew why he had so many tattoos. He covered all the marks and scars from his trauma.

I was being a coward and hiding in here, unsure how to deal with all of this, unsure how to handle my own emotions. God, Kostya had seemed so

detached as he told me, his voice never changing, his expression so stoic and cold I still felt shivers because of it.

The biggest part of me wanted to comfort him, but how did you do that to a man like Kostya, who I was pretty sure didn't have any more compassion in him?

It had been stripped, whipped, cut, and burned out of him for so many years that I wasn't sure it could ever come back.

When I came out of the room hours before, I wanted to tell him it was time for me to go back to my apartment, that we'd work things out, that we could and would start over.

Maybe I was a fool for trying to rationalize this whole situation, trying to connect with my "captor." But as I'd looked down at him cleaning those weapons, his expression so void, I wanted to know more about his journey.

And he told me. He told me so much that I knew I would have nightmares because of it.

I looked out the window and realized the entire day had rushed by, but it all seemed like a blur. I wasn't hungry and had barely eaten anything all day. How could I have an appetite when I'd heard about how someone I had cared about and loved had suffered and hurt for so long?

I heard the front door open and close, turned my attention toward the hallway, waiting for him to come in, but as the seconds turned into minutes, I knew he wouldn't.

I could hear the heavy sound of his boots on the wooden floor as he walked back and forth. Then I heard a cabinet door opening and closing. He set something heavy on the counter, and my curiosity got the best of me.

But still I didn't move. I wanted to. I wanted to go to him, to wrap my arms around his big body, to run my fingers over his tattooed skin, which I now knew underneath all that ink he was were covered with scars.

I wanted to kiss every single one of them. But I also knew my touches probably wouldn't be welcome.

I sat there for long minutes thinking everything over. It was still hard to imagine my father had been the one to send Kostya to that hell, although I was a stupid girl for thinking otherwise.

But he'd seemed so genuinely sad, so concerned with my sadness. And because I'd grown up with him sheltering and coddling me, it was easy to see my father as something and someone he wasn't.

I scrubbed my hands over my face and suddenly felt so tired. Emotionally and mentally, my body feeling like it wanted to shut down.

Everything had been silent for a long moment, but I wondered if Kostya had left, and so I found myself standing and walking out the door, down the hallway, and stopping when I got to the main room.

The kitchen was to my right, the living room to my left. Aside from an average-looking couch that sat in front of a TV that hung on the wall, and a bookshelf with some haphazard titles shoved in the nooks, there wasn't much else to take up the space.

I swept my gaze across the room, and as the light from the setting sun filtered in through the partially closed curtains, I froze as I saw the chair pushed back in the corner of the room, shrouded in darkness.

Kostya sat on the leather chair, and aside from the waning sunlight pouring in, the only other light in the cabin came from the small light above the kitchen sink.

The shadows were intimate as they wrapped around him, as if they couldn't bear to let any of the light touch Ruin.

Ruin. Kostya. The boy who turned into a man who was now a monster.

"They took me away that night. But I had to say goodbye even if you wouldn't know. I wanted to leave you something to remember me by."

I exhaled as I remembered that part painfully. The necklace he'd given me felt heavier as it hung around my throat.

He shifted slightly on the chair, the leather adjusting to his massive size. He brought his arm up and drank deeply from the whiskey bottle.

Although I couldn't make out the features of his face, I *felt* him staring right at me.

The awkward silence stretched on as he kept drinking from that bottle, neither one of us speaking, the air in the room feeling heated, more oppressed.

"Did my stories make you sad?" he finally said after taking an especially long pull from the bottle.

I curled my fingers around my shirt, one that was actually mine. After I'd stayed in the room, I changed into the clothing he brought for me—soft leggings and a tunic.

My feet were bare, but I was blessedly covered from head to toe, undergarments included. For some reason it made me feel as if I were more

protected, having this barrier against Kostya and my warring emotions that confused the hell out of me.

My throat was dry, my mouth feeling as if I'd been chugging sand. I couldn't form a word in that moment as I thought back to his stories, how I felt all day because of them.

"Yes," I said honestly but he didn't respond. I didn't even think he blinked. "But I'm more angry than sad." Even in the darkness I could see one of his eyebrows cock up.

He leaned back, the leather making a soft sound as it adjusted to his weight again.

He had one elbow resting on the arm of the chair, the other one lifting up again so he could take another long drink. When he set the bottle beside him, I watched as he ran his tongue over his bottom lip.

"Is that so?" His voice had no inclination, his tone even, as if he were almost bored.

I didn't know why that made me feel so on edge.

"Yes."

If he wanted the truth I'd give it to him, at least as much as I could for as long as I had the courage.

"I've been sad for the last decade. I was heartbroken knowing you left," I said and took a step forward. "Destroyed you didn't say goodbye." A part of me knew it was stupid to go any closer. He was like a caged lion but the door wasn't locked.

"Heartbroken? Destroyed, huh?"

"Yes," I whispered.

I tried not to take it personally that he sounded almost amused by my statement, because I knew despite the exterior he exuded, Kostya did care for me in his own fucked-up, twisted way, I supposed.

He might not look at me the same way he did all those years ago, but I was his. I knew that as much as I knew the blood rushed through my veins and the air filled my lungs.

I knew that as strongly as I was aware I was stepping closer, feeling any kind of hesitation leave me, any kind of uncertainty wash away.

In its place was a dark tendril of buried emotions, raw feelings, and so much need that I felt suffocated from it.

But when I heard this low, animalistic sound leave him, I stopped. I was still close enough I could see his nostrils flare as if he scented the change in

me.

He ran his finger up and down the neck of the bottle, and the task shouldn't have been as sexual as it appeared, but it was and had heat starting to pour between my thighs and explode outward.

I had no idea what was happening, and I was a little afraid by the intensity of it.

"You act afraid but we both know that's not the only thing you feel."

I swallowed and felt my heartbeat jump into my throat. *Thump-thump. Thump-thump.*

"Why don't you tell me what else you're feeling?"

I tightened my fingers around my shirt and whispered, "You know."

I thought I'd said the words too low for him to hear, but the low chuckle he gave me was loud and clear.

"Didn't you know I would have gladly torn the entire fucking world apart just to have a gaping hole where my love for you would fit, where the pain of losing you could live?"

His words were so raw that I felt like I was being cut in half, my insides being opened up and sacrificed to some higher power. I even clutched up my abdomen, swearing that he left a wound inside of me.

"I bet you're conflicted right now, aren't you?"

I didn't answer, because I didn't know how to. I wanted to be truthful, because that was what I'd told myself I'd do when I came out here.

But now faced with that reality, the words were stuck in my throat.

"Go on, sweetheart," he taunted. "Tell me those warring emotions in you, the ones that make you hate yourself but also make you want to do more." I saw a glimmer of *something* dark and deadly and… delicious in his gaze. "Tell me the things that will embarrass you, but will ultimately turn you on."

God, the way he said that had parts of my body tingling, throbbing, heating and growing wet embarrassingly quickly.

"How about I help you with that, baby? How about I make it easy for you?"

My heart was racing, as if I were a rabbit rushing through the woods, running faster than the fox that chased me because my life depended on it.

"How about I take the indecision away from you? Would you like that?"

I bit my bottom lip hard enough it stung, knew it would be swollen and bruised.

“Use your words, sweetheart.”

I could’ve moaned from the endearment that spilled from his lips, because it didn’t sound sweet or gentle. It sounded like the crack of a whip across my body.

“Yes.” It was the only thing I could come up with, the only word that would form on my tongue and spill from my lips.

He stayed silent for so long that I started to get antsy, slightly embarrassed. What was I doing?

I opened my mouth, about to tell him to take me back to the city, that I couldn’t do this, that I didn’t want to… although that would have been a lie.

But before I could say anything I felt the air change, saw something in his expression shift.

“Come here.” His voice was deep and dark, and there was a touch of dominance that I’d never heard before, not in the way he said the words, how he pronounced them, or the tone in his voice.

I must’ve stayed there too long, longer than I thought, because a low growl left him, as if there were an animal in the house with us.

“Be a good girl and come here, Anastasia.”

The feminine side of me should’ve felt offended at how he just spoke to me. But that part was taking a very deep back seat inside of me, and in its place was the need to just… feel good.

I ran my tongue over my bottom lip and took a step closer, knowing I shouldn’t, but here I was, moving closer and closer to him.

When I stood just a few feet from Kostya, he leaned forward to brace his forearms on his thighs and stared at me.

And for long seconds he didn’t speak, just let his gaze travel from my head to my toes, then slowly back up, pausing at the junction of my thighs, then at my breasts, and stopped when he got to my eyes.

“Take off your clothes.” He leaned back, rested his arms on the back of the chair, really spreading out that big, very male body, and watched and waited for me to obey.

“Why?” It was a stupid question. I knew why he wanted me to get undressed—and I wanted to—but a girl had to act like she had her shit together and question the questionable things in life, right?

“Why?” He cocked a dark brow again. “Because I want to see what you look like naked, princess. I want to look at your tits and pussy, because

although my imagination is pretty fucking vivid and lewd, the real thing is always better."

My heart nearly stuttered at his crude words.

"So… fucking strip, baby." He flicked a finger between us. "Now, baby girl."

I should have told Kostya to go fuck himself for speaking to me in that way. But God, I had to be just as dirty as he was because I was so wet, my pussy tingling, my nipples stiff, my breasts feeling more heavy and ultra-sensitive than they ever had before.

But I didn't say any of that. Instead I started doing exactly what he wanted me to do. Exactly what he told me.

And when I stood there naked before him, I didn't know what to expect. Maybe for him to say something, to show some kind of emotion?

Because I didn't get either of those. Sitting back in his chair looking as if he were at a business meeting. Zero hint of desire on his face.

The only indication that he wanted me was his still-hard cock pressed against his pants, the wet spot that was starting to show up through the material.

And I don't know why I found his indifference such a turn-on. But I clenched my thighs together as I felt moisture start to slide out of me, slipping down my inner thighs at an embarrassingly quick rate.

"Spread your legs. Wide. I want to see how fucking wet I've made you." He sounded almost pissed.

But the way he curled his hands around the edge of the armrest, his knuckles white, the veins in his forearms popping out, I had a feeling he was doing everything in his power to act like he didn't give a shit right now.

And I feel the surge of power move through me at that. Because here was this massive man, over six and a half feet tall, ink branded on every part of his body, yet with me he was losing control.

And I knew… I knew I had power over this beast of a man.

I opened my legs for him, feeling his gaze latch on to my bared pussy, knowing he saw the droplet of pussy arousal I felt sliding down my leg. He leaned forward even more, getting closer, his nostrils flaring as he inhaled.

"Look at that," he grunted. I tensed when he reached out and ran the pad of his finger along that bead of arousal, brought the digit to his mouth, and sucked off my pussy juice while he stared right into my eyes.

“Sweeter than I imagined,” he murmured. He slowly leaned back in the chair and flicked his hand toward the floor. “On your knees. Legs spread. And lean back and play with that pussy.”

I couldn’t catch my breath as a part of me fought his dominance. But the bigger part of me said screw it, that him calling the shots and all but making me do these things had endorphins exploding inside of me.

I obeyed, my body working on its own as I sank to the ground, the floor painful beneath my knees, but it felt good.

He watched me the entire time as he slowly leaned back in his chair, spread his thighs slightly to get comfortable, and then ran his hand up and down his thigh, his nails scraping against the material of his pants.

His gaze was riveted to the intimate spot between my legs, and in turn, mine was locked on to the massive erection that lay big and long against his thigh, protruding from his pants as if he’d smuggled a paint roller behind them.

“Touch yourself.” His voice was so calm, conversational, and if not for his hard-on I wouldn’t have thought he was affected by this at all.

I slowly licked my lips and slipped my hand down my belly and between my thighs, my fingers coming in contact with my slippery pussy.

God, I was so soaked, my arousal smearing across my inner thighs and no doubt dripping onto the floor.

I could hear my flesh moving together obscenely as I slipped my fingers between my lips, teasing my hole and then bringing the digit back up to thrum against my clit.

A gasp of pleasure and sensitivity left me, and I heard his nails scrape against his pant leg as if he were trying to grapple with his control.

I closed my eyes as the pleasure spiked in me.

“Oh no, baby girl. Eyes on me. I want to be the one you’re looking at as you touch your pussy.”

I opened my eyes, which seemed impossible to do at that moment. I’d never done anything so intensely erotic and intimate before… touching myself in front of someone else, letting them see a part of my body that only I’d ever seen.

“Show me how you play with it.”

Those words shouldn’t have sounded as dirty as they did, but they had warm, wet heat spilling between my thighs.

I obeyed him, did what he wanted as I watched him lower his gaze to the feminine spot between my legs.

I slid my fingers through my slippery folds, teased my opening, then moved back up my cleft and ran the pad over my clit. A shudder left me, more wetness spilled from me, and I breathed out a low moan.

“Thatta girl. That’s my girl.”

I moaned at his praise and continued touching myself, masturbating in front of Kostya as he sat there and looked at me as if he were unaffected, as if I were wasting his time.

God, he showed zero emotion aside from his praise, but it was so hot, such a turn-on that I felt the orgasm start to build in me embarrassingly fast.

“God, yes.” Those dual words left me before I could stop them, and I let my head fall back, but kept my eyes open. I felt like they were just mere slits as I focused on Kostya. He was so big, his shoulders so wide, his chest so muscular and broad.

I thought back to how he looked without his shirt on. Shame he’d donned one again, but that was okay because my memory was vivid enough.

“Look at that wet spot you’re making on the floor, sweetheart, a big one right between your legs because your pussy is drenched for me,” Kostya said as if he read my mind, or maybe I’d said those words out loud. “I’m such a nasty bastard for making you play with your cunt, aren’t I?” I moaned at his explicit words. “I’m a fucking deviant for being a voyeur and watching you play with that pretty pink pussy.”

I moaned again and rubbed my clit faster. I was so close… so close. He reached down and curled his big hand around his cock, rubbing his palm up and down the length through his pants.

“That’s my good fucking girl.”

I couldn’t stop staring at his erection as it pressed against his pant leg, all but throbbing, the definition of the crown clearly visible every time he moved his palm up the length, pulling and stretching the fabric in the process.

He shifted slightly, a sliver of light washing across his lap. I gasped as I saw the wet spot at the head of his cock, seeped through his pants.

I rubbed faster, wanting to go over the edge.

“Yeah, that’s it. Feel good, Anastasia?”

I gave a slight nod, opened my mouth, and was about to spill over the edge when he said the one word that was like cold water on me.

“Stop.”

I gasped and opened my eyes more. “W-what?”

He reached out and placed a finger under my chin, tipping my head back more so my throat was bare. “How much do you want to forget about the past ten years?”

He didn’t give me time to respond. Maybe he saw the answer in my eyes.

“Do you want to just *feel* at this moment? Do you want me to make all the pain go away?”

“Yes,” I whispered, not sure what I was agreeing to, but God help me, I wouldn’t stop this.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-ONE

Ruin

"As much as I like you being a little afraid of me, your anger turns me on even more." I stood and held my hand out to her. It took her a second to slip her hand into mine.

When she was standing in front of me, my cock jerked something fierce at the doe-like expression as she stared up at me.

"So small," I murmured and lifted my hand to cup her cheek, smoothing my thumb under her eye.

"I'm not going to stop." I knew it was a warning as much as anything else. I was asking her without saying the specific words that if she wanted to stop, this was the time to do it.

"I never asked you to," she whispered, her eyes so wide as she continued to hold my gaze.

My cock jerked behind my pants at hearing her say that, at seeing the rapid beat of her pulse at the base of her throat.

I lowered my gaze to her breasts, and slid my hand down her neck, over her collarbones, and cupped the small, firm mound of her breast. I took my other hand and shoved it down my pants, palming my heavy weight. I smoothed my thumb over the head of my cock, smearing the copious amounts of pre-cum seeping out the slit.

My muscles clenched at how fucking good that felt. I thumbed her nipple, hearing her breath catch, feeling the peak tighten even more.

"Look at you," I murmured and lowered my gaze to watch as I teased the tight tip at the same time I slowly jerked myself off. "So fucking pretty."

I leaned back slightly so I could continue to look at her smooth, flawless skin.

I looked down her flat belly, over her slightly flared hips, along her long legs, and made my way back up so I was looking at her bare pussy.

“I like that your cunt is hairless. I bet it’s sensitive, isn’t it, baby?”

She didn’t answer but she didn’t have to. I could see I was right by the way she bit her lip, and hear it by the soft moan she gave me.

I got all up in her personal space again. Her breath caught as she moved one step back. I smirked, loving this little resistance she gave me.

I felt like the hunter as she kept backing up, but I wasn’t going to give up the prey. I followed her steps, maneuvering her to where I wanted her to be. And that was right in the bedroom.

When Anastasia realized where we were, her eyes narrowed a little, but I could practically feel her heart beating through her chest. I moved my hand down from her breast and gripped her wrists, sliding my fingers inward so I could press my thumb to her pulse point.

Thump-thump-thump-thump.

I took a step back and pushed my pants down, letting them pool at my feet, too impatient as I grabbed my cock and started jerking myself off.

Anastasia’s eyes were big and round, her mouth in a pretty little O shape as she watched me be a lewd fucker.

“I’m big,” I said honestly. “And you’re tiny.” I let my gaze travel up and down her lithe little body. I was jerking off in slow, steady movements now, rubbing my palm over the head, smearing all that pre-cum around and moving back down to the base where my shaft and balls connected before dragging my hand back up.

“You’re cocky,” she breathed out.

I gave a little bark of laughter, surprised she could pull these things from me after I’d been rid of them for so long.

“Maybe, but what I’m not is a liar.” I let go of my cock but only long enough to stare into her eyes as I spit in my palm and brought it back to my cock to start jerking off again.

I grinned at how scandalized she looked after I did that.

“All these years I’ve fantasized about all the depraved, nasty shit I want to do to you.” I took a step closer. “The amount of times I rubbed one out thinking about you on your knees, staring up at me with your mouth full of my cock and spit dribbling out the corners as you gagged on me…” I

squeezed my cock, a groan leaving me. “I haven’t been with a woman, baby, but believe me when I say I know exactly what I’m going to do to you.”

She slowly licked her lips and I watched the act, my dick jerking in my hand, even more pre-cum slipping out the tip.

Her gaze flicked down to my cock and I held the girthy weight out, the tip pointing right at her. She licked her lips again and I knew what I’d have her do.

“Come here.”

She didn’t move and I growled.

“That’s one. Now come here.”

Her little, perky tits shook as she started breathing harder. But she still didn’t move.

I slowly grinned. “That’s two more.”

Her brows lowered.

“Three total right now, sweetheart.”

“Three what?” Her voice was so breathless.

I lowered my head and took a step closer. Fuck, I swore I could smell the sweet wetness of her cunt the closer I moved.

“Three times I’m going to spank that pert little ass of yours for not listening to me.” I tightened my fist around my cock and moved closer still until I could rub the tip of my erection along her skin, smearing my pre-cum on her belly. Marking her.

“Oh, God.” I didn’t miss how that sounded more like a plea than anything else.

“I can’t wait to have you draped over my lap as I spank the hell out of you until your pretty ass is red and sensitive. And then, sweetheart, then I’m going to fuck you and ease that ache I know has settled between your thighs.”

My balls were tight to my body as I kept lazily stroking myself, looking down at her and waiting for her to listen to what I said.

She hadn’t said no, hadn’t stopped this, so that meant we did this my way.

And then she slowly sank to her knees, and I clenched my jaw at how good it felt to have her obey.

“Mmm,” I groaned and looked down at her. “You see how much better it is when you listen to me like my good girl?”

I could see a flush rising along her chest and creeping up her neck and cheeks.

“Is my pretty girl embarrassed by what I’m making her do?”

“No.”

“Liar. But that’s okay. I like you like this, pretending you don’t want it when we both know you do.” I lifted my free hand and gently touched the back of her head. “You want it dirty, sweetheart?”

She nodded before I knew she could stop herself. She was too far gone right now to care how “wrong” this all seemed.

I tangled my hand in the strands at the back of her head, tugging her head back, watching as her mouth parted for me, her tongue coming out and moving along her full bottom lip.

“I’m not going to go easy on you. Are you ready for that?”

“God yes,” she moaned and closed her eyes.

“Look at me,” I demanded and waited until she opened her eyes. I aligned the head of my dick right in front of her mouth and gritted out, “Open wider. You’re gonna need to in order to take all of this.”

I could see a lone tear slide down her cheek and grunted, as I was a depraved bastard because that turned me on so damn much.

She opened as far as she could and I slid the bulbous head of my erection inside, groaning at the instant wet heat surrounding me. “Such a good girl. Now close those gorgeous red lips around me and start sucking.” I stared into her eyes and said, “Eyes on me the entire fucking time. You’re going to watch me as you suck my cock like a dirty girl, your knees aching, your cunt soaked, your nipples tight.”

I had my jaw locked as I slowly thrust in and out. “Relax that throat, let me hit all the way back there, baby.” I started moving shallowly at first, letting her get used to having my cock in her mouth, but I wasn’t going to be able to be gentle like this for long. It wasn’t in my nature.

Another tear slipped down her cheek, and I let go of her hair to smooth my thumb over her cheek, collecting that tear and bringing it to my mouth to lick it off.

“How shameful do you feel right now?”

She hollowed her cheeks, sucking harder, taking me in deeper until I felt my tip hit the back of her throat and heard her gag, felt her throat muscles convulse around me.

I thrust my hips back and forth, pushing in a bit more of my erection with every passing second until soon I was fucking her face, my hand now back in her hair as I held her tightly to me, refusing to let her go anywhere.

She curled her hands around my thighs, dug her nails into my flesh that I hissed. I pushed all the way forward until her nose was pressed to my groin. “Swallow,” I gritted out harshly. I held her face right up against me for a prolonged second, feeling her throat continue to work as she obeyed. I pulled her back and let my cock slip from her mouth so she could suck in a great breath of air. And then I pushed back in.

I thrust my hips forward and retreated. Back and forth, faster and a little harder.

“My good girl.” My balls slapped her chin. And her moans vibrated up the length of my dick. “You’re doing so fucking well.”

She hollowed out her cheeks again, the breath sawing in and out of me as I saw spit start to come out the sides of her mouth before sliding out and coating her face with our depravity.

“Fuck that’s hot.” I tightened my hands in her hair, pulling at the strands, knowing I was probably hurting her but unable to stop. “I bet you’d like to swallow all my cum, wouldn’t you?” She moaned. “Not now, baby. When I give it to you, it’ll be when I’m balls deep in that virgin little pussy of yours.”

I wanted nothing more than to shoot it all down her throat and make her swallow every last drop, but the idea of claiming her, marking her from the inside out in a primal, animalistic way, won out.

“You’re doing so good, making me feel so good, Ana.”

I felt my balls tighten and knew I was about to come. I pulled out of her mouth, gripping my now saliva-soaked length, and smacked her cheek with the flushed, slippery head once, twice and once more before forcing myself to take a step back.

I squeezed my dick to try and hold off from spraying my load all over her, although the very thought of painting her throat in a white, milky necklace almost had me saying fuck it and finishing off on her.

She was still on her knees before me, her hair a wild mess from when I was tugging and pulling at the strands, her mouth still parted, her lips red and swollen, spit still making her cheeks and chin glossy.

Fuck, she was a beautiful sight.

I bent down and lifted her easily into my arms, walked us to the bed, and sat down, adjusting her so she was draped over my lap, that perfect little toned ass of hers on full display.

“What—”

“You fucking knew this was coming, so no stopping it.” I brought my hand down on her ass hard and fast before I even finished speaking.

She cried out, her back arching, her thigh muscles clenching.

“I bet that fucking hurt, didn’t it?” I smoothed my palm over her ass, easing the sting, feeling how warm her skin was just from that one smack. “Spread your legs. Let me see how pretty that pussy is.”

She took only a second before obeying.

The scent of her drove me mad, and I slid my hand over the curve of her ass before slipping it between her legs, curling my hands along her inner thigh, and wrenching her open even more.

“Look at how pink your pussy is, my sweet girl.” Her thighs were glossy from her arousal, and I smoothed my hand all over it, smearing it even more, rubbing it into her flesh. I brought my hand up, holding her gaze with mine as she looked over her shoulder, and ran my tongue up the length of my palm.

“Delicious,” I praised. “Let’s see how pink we can make this cunt.”

“Kostya—”

I cut off her words as I brought my hand down against her pussy, slapping the tender flesh until she cried. My cock jerked at the sound, digging into her belly.

“Oh, God. It hurts—”

“It fucking feels incredible. Admit it.” I brought my hand down on her cunt again and again.

She arched her back and cried out, “Yes.”

Her toes were pointed straight as she tried to grapple with what she felt.

I only spanked her pussy twice more before smoothing the hurt away and rubbing her clit. She gave me the prettiest moan in response. I kept tweaking her clit, pulling that bundle of engorged flesh between my thumb and forefinger until she moaned long and loud.

I leaned in close, running the tip of my nose along the length of her spine, scenting her, then dragging my tongue along the same path, licking up the salty flavor of her sweat.

She was wet and pliant and so fucking sweet. I cupped my hand between her thighs, but didn't add pressure, just held her, letting her feel me.

"I know you want to come, sweet girl, but you're going to be good for me and wait." I spanked her ass a couple more times.

The little mewling noise had me smirking in sadistic satisfaction. I had her back in my arms, adjusted us on the bed so I was on my back, and positioned her so she straddled my face.

Her eyes were wide and almost fear-stricken as she looked down at me, her hands braced on my shoulders.

"I bet this terrifies you, doesn't it?"

She licked her lips and I palmed her ass, rubbing the silky smooth cheeks with my oversized hands.

"Use your words like a good girl."

"Yes," she said. "This scares me because it seems like it's all going so fast."

I clicked my tongue. "This is a long time coming, baby."

My cock was a stiff rod between us, and every little shift I made on the mattress had it bobbing almost painfully.

"I want you to place that wet pussy over my mouth and ride me, baby."

Her eyes got even wider before she shook her head. "Oh yes. The time to back out is over." I swatted her ass and felt the flesh jiggle slightly. "Now fucking work that pussy on my face until you come."

She was breathing so hard and fast I thought she might hyperventilate. "I don't know what to do."

I groaned in ecstasy at how much that turned me on to hear her say that. To know I was the only man she'd ever been with… ever let touch her. And I knew that because I'd been watching her this whole time, making sure no fucker got too close.

And now here she was… mine.

I gripped her waist and pulled her up so forcefully she had to brace her hands on the wall in front of her to steady herself.

"Just work yourself on me and let me take over the rest."

She swallowed audibly and shifted slightly, spreading her legs impossibly wider, showing me her drenched cunt, and causing a dangerous sound to be pulled from the center of my chest.

I groaned and pulled her closer at the same time I lifted my head. I felt a drop of her cunt juice on my lips and groaned as I licked it off.

Then I fucking devoured her.

I dragged my tongue up her center, swirled it around her clit before sucking it in my mouth for only a second, then moved back down to lick her pussy hole.

After a few long seconds of this fucking torture, she started getting lost in the ecstasy, moaning and mewling above me and grinding her pussy on my face, finding her pleasure and chasing it.

I had a grip on her ass cheeks now and spread them wide as I slipped my hand between them and teased her little asshole. Oh, God, that was fucking good. She was hot and tight and I could envision sliding my cock deep in that tight hole.

She tensed and gasped, clearly shocked I was touching her in this “forbidden” spot. But I didn’t stop eating her out, and instead renewed my efforts by sucking her clit into my mouth.

With the tip of my finger wedged in her ass, I smacked her cheek with my other hand and shoved my tongue in her cunt. Her muscles clenched me tightly, her body needing something far thicker than this.

I licked and sucked, my face wet from her juices, her moans filling my ears. I wanted to fucking suffocate because her pussy was right on my face, my air flow cut off as I got all up in her.

I sucked her clit into my mouth rhythmically. Her body trembled, her orgasm right at the surface. I could feel it, sense it surrounding us.

And when I made a deep, vibrating sound around her clit, pushing my finger deeper into her ass until she exploded for me. My face got soaked from her orgasm and turned me the fuck on.

I let her ride it out until she stopped grinding her cunt on my face and almost slid off and onto the bed, unable to hold herself up any longer.

I flipped her onto her back, gripped her inner thighs and spread her wide, and looked down at her pussy. She was so fucking pink and drenched. I’d never seen anything more perfect or feminine than what Anastasia had between her thighs.

“Kostya,” she whispered my name in this dreamlike tone, and I trailed my gaze leisurely up her body. When our eyes locked, I ran a hand over my cheeks, mouth, and jaw, wiping away her juices, then dragged my tongue up the center of my palm, not wasting a drop.

“I want to be gentle, good fucking lord, baby, I want to. But I can’t.” I gripped my cock and stroked myself. *Just one more taste.*

I moved down her body, sucking a berry-pink nipple into my mouth. I did the same with the other until both stood hard and red.

I licked around her little belly button, then spread her pussy lips apart, stared at her cunt for a second, and let a string of saliva drip from my mouth to her slit. She gasped and I glanced up at her. Oh… my girl fucking liked this nastiness.

I spit on her pussy once more before groaning and dragging my tongue from her hole to her clit.

Enough fucking around. I had to claim her.

I gripped myself once more, notched the head at her entrance, and braced my other hand on the bed beside her head. We were both panting, the scent of our combined sweat and sex filling the room and making me feel drunk.

In one hard thrust, I pushed all my cock into her, hearing her cry out, feeling her nails dig into my flesh, and groaning at how tight she was as her inner muscles clamped down.

My penetration had been rough for her first time, but fuck me, I couldn’t help it.

The sound that came out of me was gruff, a harsh bark of noise as my balls drew up impossibly tighter and pressed against the curve of her ass.

“Oh, God,” she whined. “It’s too much. You’re too big.”

I grunted and pulled back before sliding in deep once more. “Take all of me. Open up that fucking pussy and take every single inch.”

She closed her eyes and bit her bottom lip as she shook her head back and forth. Not a denial, but more like she couldn’t control herself as the sensations were too much.

“It hurts,” she breathed and when I ground my pelvis against her, hitting her clit in the process. She moaned.

“I don’t care if it hurts. I want to split you in two until you’re clinging to me because I’m the only thing keeping you anchored.”

I moved the hand by her head closer, tangled my fingers in her hair, and jerked her head back so her throat was bare and her mouth was wide as she gasped.

I grabbed her hip with my other hand and snarled as I pulled out and slammed back in.

“You’re mine,” I said harshly.

Over and over I did this, my thrusting roughly. She’d be so sore after I was done.

“You’ve always been mine.” I knew I’d leave bruises on her body, marks of my brand, of my ownership. “I’ll never let you go.”

I leaned down and ran my tongue over the side of her neck, tasting her before I bit her, not breaking the skin but knowing my teeth dug in hard enough it hurt.

“Oh, God.” She cried and I pulled out only to slam back home.

“Fuck,” I hissed. “So right. So fucking right I can’t breathe without you.” I looked down at where we were connected.

I was stretching her so wide, her skin tight around my cock, my shaft glossy, her inner thighs slick.

“Say it. Tell me what I what to fucking hear.”

Her breath hitched when I thrust my hips forward, burying myself deep in her.

“Be my good girl.”

Her nails dug into my forearms, crescent shapes breaking my skin. “I’m yours. I’ve been yours since the beginning.”

I snarled. “Yeah, you fucking have.” She started sliding her hips to meet my thrusts. “*Jesus Christ*, baby. Yeah, that’s it. You’re doing so good,” I grunted. “Fuck yourself on me. Work for my cum by grinding that tight cunt on my cock and getting me off.”

She started moving her hips faster, her clit rubbing on my pelvis, my cock stretching her wide and hitting her deep.

“You’re going to be my good girl and do this because you want me to feel good. You want to please me and get me off, isn’t that right, sweetheart?”

I felt her pussy clamp down on me and groaned at how good that felt.

Yes,” she cried out as she came.

I couldn’t stop myself from following right behind her.

I slammed into her once, twice, three times, and as much as I wanted to fill her up with my cum, I pulled out at the last minute, her legs falling open because she didn’t have the strength to keep them up anymore.

As I feverishly jerked myself off, I stared at her pussy. I felt my muscles tighten as my orgasm hit me.

I aimed my cock head at her belly and exploded, thick white arcs of semen shooting out of me and covering her belly in milky ribbons. I kept coming and covered her tits and neck with my seed, groaning at the sight of my brand on her.

I ran my free hand over her belly, breasts, and finally her throat, smearing myself into her like my cum was fucking lotion.

Fuck, that was good.

When I was spent, my balls drained, her body covered in *me*, I now had both hands on either side of her body, caging her in as we both caught our breath.

I leaned in and rested my forehead on her shoulder as I tried to breath normally. I smelled *me* all over her, and it had possessiveness slamming into me tenfold.

I straightened and leaned back, just staring at her and how fucking beautiful she looked. “You should see yourself right now, all covered in my cum with an ‘I just got thoroughly fucked’ look on your face.”

When I settled myself on the bed beside her, I pulled her in close, glad she wasn’t fighting me on this. Instead she curled against me, her warm breath fanning over my chest as I traced the length of her spine.

“How is this ever going to work out?”

I slid my hand up her spine to cup the back of her head. “I don’t know, but I know that even if I don’t fucking deserve you, even if you want to leave, I won’t let you go.” I pulled her in tighter, and after a while, her breathing evened out and she slipped into a deep sleep.

And surprisingly enough, for the first time in the last decade, so did I.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-TWO

Anastasia

I wasn’t sure what woke me, but as my eyes opened, I felt this strange combination of calmness and euphoria.

For the first time in a very long time, I felt like everything would be okay.

I turned my head and saw Kostya sleeping right next to me, his big, muscular chest on full display as the blanket pooled at his waist.

I stared at all of his tattoos, his body so massive, the wolf head that was inked in the center of his chest so intricate in its detail. The lines were sharp, the colors crisp.

I was about to touch the intricate lines, tracing them with the pad of my finger, but I curled my hand into a tight fist and stopped, not wanting to wake him.

Because his expression looked… at ease. I wondered if he’d ever really been relaxed in these last ten years, if he’d ever found any kind of peace.

Right now he certainly seemed like he wasn’t troubled. And that brought a smile to my face.

I got out of bed as silently as I could, grabbed one of his shirts to slip on, and only stopped once I was at the doorway to look over my shoulder. He still slept soundly, shifting ever so slightly on the mattress.

God, he certainly was beautiful, with that masculine, purely male body on display.

I found my body heating all over again.

I clenched my legs together, soreness settled right at my center, feeling the stickiness of his orgasm when he smeared it in my skin coating my inner thighs.

A rush of desire made its way through me once more. I loved this man. I loved him so much my body ached, tightened for every single thing he'd give me.

I wanted it all with him. I wanted us to finally get our happily ever after.

And that meant I was going to cut my father out of my life.

I'd thought about it more than once after hearing Kostya's stories. I could never look at my father again after what he'd done.

But the little girl inside of me couldn't stop remembering all the comfort and sweet words of confidence my father had given me while I was growing up.

The love I had for him couldn't be ignored, but it could be pushed to the back.

I didn't want him dead, so I hoped once I told Kostya I wouldn't be seeing my father again and wanted to start our lives together, he'd let go of his vengeance.

I couldn't talk Kostya out of killing him, not that I'd try. Because the horrors that the man I loved had endured could not be forgiven, not ever.

But maybe the promise of a future with me would make Kostya see that death and revenge weren't the only things in life.

Maybe we could move forward.

Once I was done using the bathroom, I headed out into the kitchen for a glass of water. I stood by the sink and stared out the window; the security lights beamed at the thick line of trees that surrounded the house. It wasn't lost on me that I could probably escape right now, at least get a head start before he undoubtedly caught me. But the desire to leave just… wasn't there.

I was insane. Had lost my mind because leaving was the last thing I wanted.

I drank deeply and thought about how everything was going to play out.

Tomorrow I'd talk to Kostya about leaving. I had to go home. I had a life to live. But that didn't mean I didn't want him in my life. We'd just found each other again.

I didn't want to lose him.

Maybe it was fucked up of me to want anything to do with Kostya after what he'd done, how he drugged me and kidnapped me… killed in front of me. Maybe I was suffering from some kind of insane Stockholm Syndrome.

I certainly wasn't relating to him, but I did empathize with how he had to change to survive. He had to harden, become someone totally different so the world and the people around him didn't destroy every single part of him.

After setting the glass down, I turned to face the living room, seeing his large black duffel sitting beside the wall.

I didn't know why I started walking toward it, why I thought it was smart to crouch down and open it, and certainly didn't think it was a good idea to look inside and see all the various weapons.

I'd never seen so many in my life. I ran my fingers over the cold metal, then my fingers skated over a burner phone. I sat down on the floor and pulled my knees up to my chest as I lifted my hand and touched my throat.

I felt the thin metal chain and the small locket attached to it and curled my fingers around it, knowing that I had to cut my father out of my life. I couldn't look at him without remembering all the heinous shit Kostya told me.

I sat there for several more minutes before I finally pushed myself up and walked back to the room.

I slipped in bed beside Kostya, the heat of his body and the scent of his skin causing me to close my eyes, inhale deeply, and allow myself this moment of peace before the shit hit the fan.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-THREE

Ruin

In the last decade I'd never slept so soundly, never felt so peaceful. I could have been a dick and said it was because I'd gotten laid, but that would be a big fucking lie.

It was because for the first time in my life, I finally felt a semblance of peace, like I wasn't living in my own personal hell.

Knowing she was safe right beside me, that all I had to do was reach over and spear my hands in her hair, pull her in close, and kiss her if I wanted to, was a high like I'd never experienced.

It was as if something from my past had opened up, a little bit of that humanity I thought forever gone sliding back into place because I had my girl back in my arms.

I felt myself… smile. Yeah, I was fucking smiling as I felt her body heat wrap around me.

Toska. That was what I'd felt all these long years. Yearning. An ache for nothing and everything all at once. I looked at my girl. "My heart yearned and broke for you." I kept my voice pitched too low for her to hear, but the words were the truth nonetheless.

But I'd been lying awake for the past hour, listening to the steady rise and fall of her breathing, watching her chest move as she took a deep breath in, then let it out slowly.

She looked peaceful, her skin luminescent, the dark crescent shape of her lashes long as they rested high against her cheekbones.

I reached out and let the pad of my thumb brush her jawline, then moved it along her bottom lip. I cupped the side of her face fully. She felt so soft, so warm.

She felt like mine.

I rolled onto my back and stared at the ceiling.

Although I never slept for more than a couple of hours at a time, and even though I couldn't fall back asleep, I still felt at ease, my muscles relaxed, my bones settled.

There was no urgency in me, those dark tendrils of frantic need, of constantly having to keep going, to go harder, to do more, no longer running through my bloodstream.

And it was because of my soft, sweet girl right beside me.

She was the antidote to the poison in my veins.

And I knew she'd ask to go back to the city, but I couldn't let her go. I couldn't give her up. Not when she made me feel like this.

I scrubbed a hand over my face, opened my eyes, and looked at Anastasia. I didn't know how long I stared at her, watching her sleep, but I felt this tightening in my body, the hairs on the back of my neck prickling.

I didn't waste any time as I slowly slipped out of bed, quietly put on some clothes, and grabbed the gun that I kept underneath my pillow.

And then I walked into the kitchen, grabbed my cell phone that wasn't the burner, and brought up the security app. I brought up all the cameras stationed around the property.

At first I didn't see anything out of the ordinary. But my body was telling me something was off. I'd been trained for this situation and knew when I wasn't alone.

And that was when I saw the shadows keeping close to the tree line.

I made quick work of slipping the phone in my back pocket and walking over to my duffel to grab a couple more guns. My body was the only weapon I needed to kill a man, but I wouldn't take any risks with her.

Then I was heading to the bedroom.

I knew they'd come for her. I didn't know how they got here, or how Vladimir found me.

I racked my brain on how they'd gotten here, then it clicked into place. The shit I'd gotten from her apartment, the clothes and items that I took to make her feel more at ease. *Fuck.* I'd checked everything for a tracking

device, knowing Vladimir wasn’t above doing shit like knowing where Anastasia was at all times.

But I had to have missed something, and as I retraced in my mind what I’d taken, I looked back at her sleeping form, the moonlight catching the silver chain and locket hanging around her throat.

I was beside her in seconds, reaching out and lifting the locket. She stirred as I turned it over, then opened it. I stared at the picture of the two of us, then popped them out.

Motherfucker.

Right there, the tiniest, state-of-the-art fucking tracker.

I heard them come onto the porch and gritted my teeth as that familiar rage rose in me. But it was even more intense, more primal. It was my anger mixed with the need to protect what was mine. Anastasia.

I could run with her, but I wasn’t a coward.

I was the one they ran from.

I was the predator and they were my prey.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-FOUR

Anastasia

"Anastasia, baby, you gotta get up."

It wasn't the words or the deep tenor of Kostya's voice that had woken me. It was his tone.

Fierce. Urgent.

I roused just as I felt him move the long fall of my hair away from my face. I was still half asleep when I pushed up on my elbows to blink open my eyes fully.

But when I felt something very heavy and cold pressed to my hand, I woke up really damn fast.

"What's wrong? What's going on?" As I stared into Kostya's face and saw the severity and ruthlessness of his expression, my blood ran cold.

"They're here, *milaya moyna*."

I looked down at the gun. God, it was heavy.

I heard metal on metal and glanced at Kostya to see him pulling out the magazine of his gun, checking to make sure it was full before putting it back in with a resounding *click.*

And then I heard the sound of creaking out on the porch. Someone was right outside. That was the only warning we got before the front door crashed inward.

A startled scream left me before I knew what was happening. Kostya had me off the bed and pushed down to the ground a second later.

I could hear disjointed Russian being spit out toward the front of the house, but all I heard clearly was the rushing of blood through my ears and

the sound of my pulse beating drastically.

I was vaguely aware of Kostya telling me to stay down and to shoot anyone who came at me. I had no idea what the danger was, and it was too dark in the house to see much of anything. I lifted my head and looked over the bed to glance out in the hallway. But all I saw were shadows.

But then I heard something far too familiar. My father's voice as he cursed out Kostya.

Oh, God.

I heard the rapid succession of a gun going off.

Poppoppop.

My heart was racing, and I was glad I at least had the common sense to put on a shirt when I'd gotten up earlier.

I looked down at the gun, held it tightly in my hand before glancing back up into the darkened hallway.

There were no lights on except for what came from the exterior security lights, but they were facing away from the house so it was a muted light that barely pierced through the front windows.

And then there was a bang and flash and more bullets going off, grunts and curses rising through the house. I could hear flesh hitting flesh and felt my belly tighten in dread.

I swore I could smell the tinge of copper and gun smoke in the air.

I had to do something. I had to stop them. They'd hurt Kostya. God, they'd kill him.

I pushed myself off the ground and ran to the door, keeping flat to the wall and trying to breath steadily.

I leaned over and glanced down the hallway. I couldn't see anything clearly, but I could make out four bodies all going after one person. My breath stalled and my eyes widened because I knew who they were going after.

I'd recognize Kostya even if it was pitch-dark out.

He was a head taller than all the other bodies, his shoulders like mountains. He was shirtless and only wore a pair of sweats, but God, the way he moved was fluid, like a machine that was born to do this.

And that broke my heart because that's exactly what had happened.

One of the men lifted his arm, a gun in his hand. I screamed out, but Kostya was on him, twisting his neck so fast it was nothing but a blur of

movement. And the sickening crack that followed the action had my gag reflex rising up.

I watched as the other three men all attacked him at once. But when I raised my arm, pointing the gun, I knew there was no way I could be sure I wouldn't hit Kostya in the process.

I'd never actually shot a weapon. It was too dark, and my hands were shaking.

I stepped out from the safety of the bedroom and down the hall despite Kostya telling me not to. I couldn't just stand by as he was outnumbered, although the closer I got, the more I saw he was handling them effortlessly.

He had weapons, at least one gun, but he wasn't using it, instead sticking to hand-to-hand.

He took out another man, bending him at an unnatural angle. The man screamed, his back breaking over Kostya's knee, before he was tossed aside like garbage.

Movement in the corner of the room caught my attention. I turned to see a large, shrouded figure off to the side. He lifted his arm, a gun pointed right at Kostya.

I didn't think. I just pulled the trigger. The bullet landed in the wall beside his head… five feet away. He cursed out in Russian, and I gasped, realizing it was my father whom I'd just shot at.

"Papa," I whispered, my attention back to Kostya as he dealt with the last remaining man.

Kostya pulled out a large hunting knife and brought it across the man's neck. The squelching sound of liquid seemed to fill the interior.

"Darling, come here," my father urged. "Come here." He held his hand out. "*Nyet,*" he yelled out.

I felt something heavy and hard slam into the back of my head. The gun fell from my grasp and I stumbled forward, bracing my hands on the wall. Stars popped out along my field of vision, and I blinked furiously to keep my eyesight from blacking out.

I heard nasty words hurtled at me from behind and then I was jerked around so suddenly the world twisted out underneath me. The man who held me tossed me aside as if I were nothing but a bag of dirty laundry. I fell to the floor, heard a broken up roar to my side and knew it was Kostya. I looked at the man who stood above me, but he was shrouded in thick shadows. I held a hand out, palm outward. God, it was impossible to think.

My skull throbbed, the pain unlike anything I had felt before. Or so I thought.

He brought his foot down so hard and unyielding on my ankle that I screamed out. I heard Kostya roar out again, more gunshots, and glanced to the side to see Kostya charging forward, rage on his face.

But before he got to me, my father fired a shot. I watched Kostya fall forward just as the pain got too unbearable and everything went dark.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-FIVE

Anastasia

I groaned as consciousness started to filter back into me. I could hear someone speaking to me, felt something brush along my cheek, but my eyes felt too heavy to open. The first thing I took note of was that my ankle screamed fiercely in pain and that my head throbbed.

"You'll be okay," the voice said but it sounded distorted.

I shook my head to try and clear it, shifted slightly, and realized I was on something firm but soft to the touch beneath me. I glanced down and stared at my foot, my ankle red and starting to bruise, the skin swollen and angry-looking. I remembered the fight at Kostya's house, had a flash in my mind of the soldier's boot coming down on my ankle before everything went dark.

"I've already killed the bastard who did that to you." I could hear the anger in my father's voice as he continued to stare at me. "I made his death slow."

I shivered at seeing this side of him, the side that spoke so easily about killing a man slowly.

"How did you find where I was?" I made sure to pitch my voice low, to not sound accusatory.

My father glanced down at my throat and I swallowed, the locket feeling heavy. I racked my brain for what that meant, and it didn't take long for me to realize. "You've been tracking me this entire time? For years—"

"For your protection."

I wanted to rip the necklace off, but at the same time the thought of taking it off, especially now, after what I had learned about Kostya, after what we had shared, seemed abhorrent.

“I’ve been protecting you against the people who would hurt you to get to me.” He didn’t even have the decency to look ashamed.

Because he didn’t think he did anything wrong.

“That’s a total betrayal, a lack of trust. You invaded my privacy, broke it.” It felt like a slimy second coat that covered my body. I couldn’t look at him, didn’t even want to.

A prolonged moment of silence stretched out but I refused to look at my father even though I felt the heavy weight of his stare on me.

“Where’s Kostya?”

My father’s jaw clenched in response to my question.

“He’s strong,” my father said, sounding as if he spoke to himself. He paced, running a hand through his hair. I’d never seen him look so frustrated and confused. “Ruin killed all but one of my men. The shot slowed him down. It’s the only reason we got out of there. I underestimated how possessive he was of you. I thought all this time… I underestimated him.” He was muttering to himself, sounding completely unhinged.

My heart was thundering.

“Oh, God, did you…” I couldn’t bear to say the words out loud.

“He’s alive. For now. He would have killed both of us if I hadn’t incapacitated him.”

I wanted to tell him that Kostya wouldn’t have hurt me, but as he glanced in my direction, took in my appearance and the fact I only wore one of Kostya’s shirts, his upper lip curled in disgust.

“Or maybe he wouldn’t have killed you. He would have kept you as a pet, defiling you over and over again.” He sounded disgusted. “Letting an animal fuck you, Anastasia? I’m sorely disappointed.”

He shook his head and turned around, facing the fireplace and just staring at the flames.

“Right before we saw the tracker in your necklace had pinged a new location, I was speaking with some of my men.” My father started talking, his back still facing me. “We found out very disturbing information.” He ran his hand over the back of his head. “Bad timing to hear about it, what with you missing, but now that I have you back we can work through all that.”

It was clear that whatever my father had found out was what was making him act so off-balance.

I shifted on the couch, feeling myself wake up a bit more. When I lifted my hand and touched the back of my aching head, I hissed in pain. A large goose egg had formed under my hair, and I felt the dried stickiness of what I assumed was blood matted to the strands.

I glanced at my father to see him watching me, a flash of fatherly concern on his face before he quickly masked it. It was very clear he was having an internal struggle between making sure I was okay and being disgusted that I let an “animal” fuck me.

The strangulating tightness in the room was broken up when I heard footsteps coming closer. A second later, the double doors opened and several of my father’s men walked in… dragging people with them.

For a moment, I wasn’t sure who they had. And two out of the three of them I wasn’t even sure were alive because they looked lifeless as they were carted into the room.

But it was only a second of confusion before sickening horror consumed me.

I watched helplessly as my mother, Timur, and Kostya were secured to chairs with zip ties before the soldiers left, shutting the doors behind them.

I was staring at Kostya, who was groaning and shaking his head as if to clear it. They had to have drugged him to get him so docile.

He had a bullet wound in his shoulder and another one in his leg. Blood covered his chest, and his pant leg was soaked in red from the wound.

But he was alive, and I felt monumental relief fill me.

Timur was beside Kostya, and my mother was beside my father’s right-hand man. They were also secured to chairs. Timur’s face was bloody, swollen, and bruised, and it looked like he could barely keep his head up. He also had a nasty-looking knife wound on the side of his abdomen; his shirt was in tatters, and the white stained in red.

And my mother, normally looking prim and proper and the perfectly put-together Bratva wife, was crying violently. Her mascara was running in dark streaks down her cheeks, her hair was a disheveled wreck, and I could see the fear of God in her expression.

I saw movement to my side and snapped my head to look at my father, who now held a gun. I went to stand, maybe stupidly to stop him, but a rush

of dizziness and nausea rose up swiftly. My head throbbed, and I swayed on my feet before promptly sitting back down.

“Papa, what’s going on?” My voice was tight from my pain but I managed to keep eye contact with my father.

He was staring down at the gun he held, his fingers wrapped so tightly around the weapon his knuckles were white.

“I notice all kinds of betrayal that happen around me.” He looked over at me, and the coldness in his eyes sucked the air from the room. “I used to be called a death dealer back in Moscow. Did you know that, darling?”

I shook my head, not sure what else to say or do.

“I was good at my job, good at taking out problems. Then my Pakhan noticed, promoted me up the ranks throughout the years until I’m the man you see now.”

I curled my hands around the cushion of the couch and didn’t dare take my eyes off my father. If he had his focus on me, he couldn’t hurt anyone else.

“I’ve learned over the years to control that anger and need for death. It’s a constant in me, an internal fight I deal with daily. It’s like being thirsty, Anastasia. It’s like having an ocean of ice-cold water to drink but you can’t drink your fill because you have these responsibilities. You’re no longer a death dealer. You’re a Pakhan, and you have others do your bidding.”

He glanced over at the three bodies bound to the chairs.

“And I lost track of my natural instincts, clearly. Because back in the day, I would have never missed that I had a rat infestation.” He glanced back at me. “That news I got, darling, right before we found out where you were… told me how blind I’ve been.”

“I don’t understand what’s going on.” I knew why Kostya was here. My father planned on killing him in front of me. That I had no doubt about.

But I wouldn’t just idly sit back and watch that happen. Whatever power and strength I had, I’d use it to get Kostya out of this.

I didn’t understand why Timur and my mother were here. Timur I could understand seeing as he was close to my father… but his very appearance told me he was now an enemy in Vladimir’s eyes.

Mother looked scared as hell when she glanced at my father, which wasn’t something she’d ever shown.

When my father didn’t respond, I looked at him. He was staring at the three bound people, this absolutely cold and menacing look on his face.

“Can you believe it was a slip of the tongue by one of the staff speaking in the throes of passion to one of my soldiers? She confided in him, told him the deepest secret she knew, and in turn, because his loyalties lie with me, he shared what he’d found out.” He tightened his hold on the gun. “For twenty-three years, I’ve been lied to. I’ve had betrayers under the same roof as me. I thought they were loyal. I trusted them.”

My father’s gaze slid to mine, and I wondered if he could hear my heart beating. It certainly felt like a freight train was moving inside my chest.

I shook my head because I was completely in the dark on what he was talking about. My worry for Kostya was paramount. My confusion and fear over what Timur and my mother had to do with any of this made me dizzy.

“The fact he made sure to be at all your birthday parties, your graduation, all of your dance recitals when you were younger, even your performances as you got older.”

My father was all but seething now, spittle flying out of his mouth, his face bright red as his anger grew.

“Had nothing to fucking do with loyalty.”

I looked between the two men, still not understanding what was happening. My mother was a sobbing mess now, her cries loud as she struggled against the bonds that secured her to the chair.

Kostya was starting to wake up, his low, rough groans the only thing I could focus on. I looked at him just as he lifted his head, blinking his eyes rapidly, his gaze landing on me.

His entire body tightened and his jaw clenched. His biceps tightened as he pulled his arms, trying to break free. He had a glazed-over look in his eyes, but with each passing second, I could see them becoming clearer.

His tendons and sinews all bunched and flexed, constricted and relaxed as he struggled. I heard the sound of my father cocking his gun and then watched in horror as he lifted it in Kostya’s direction.

“Ruin, shut the fuck up and calm down. It’ll be your turn soon enough.”

“Papa,” I said in a soft voice, hoping to calm him down a little bit. He looked at me for just a second and I saw this strange sort of anguish on his face. “Tell me what’s going on.”

When he exhaled and turned away from me, I looked back at Kostya. He shook his head slowly, still pulling at his arms, trying to free them. I could feel the primal energy pouring off of him.

My father walked back to the fireplace and stood there for a second, watching the flames and staying silent.

My father turned suddenly and made quick work over to Timur. He gripped his hair, yanked his head back, and coldcocked him with the butt of the gun so hard I actually gasped and stood up, instinct telling me to step forward and stop what my father was doing.

I heard Kostya growling low, but I held up a hand, hoping he'd stop. I didn't want my father's attention directed back to him.

Timur groaned and blinked open his eyes, one of them nearly swollen shut. It took him a second as he stared up at my father before recognition finally flared. He looked around the room.

When his focus landed on my mother, a deep, painful noise came from the back of his throat. And then his eyes widened and a terrified look crossed his face when his gaze found me.

A terrified look *for me.*

"That's right, motherfucker. The truth is gonna come out for everyone to hear." My father's Russian was grittier, as if he were running the streets and not helping to rule a mafia empire.

My father ran his hand over his face and lowered the gun to his side. I exhaled roughly, not realizing I'd been holding my breath this whole time.

Kostya was still as stone, muscles tense and cut sharply across his tattooed skin. Despite him being bound, he looked powerful and terrifyingly lethal.

"Tell her," my father barked out to my mother. She sat up straighter, eyes wide, black tears still streaking down her cheeks.

She shook her head feverishly and my father made a deep, low sound before taking a step toward her and lifting the gun to place it at her temple.

"Fucking tell her, you worthless whore."

I made a strangled noise, taking a step forward, but my father cut me off with a nasty glare, silently demanding I stay put.

"She's going to find out one way or another. If you wanna live for the next five minutes, you'll open your mouth and start speaking."

He dug the gun against her head and she closed her eyes, squeezing them tight.

When she opened them again, she looked at me, torment and sympathy I'd never seen come from her cutting me like sharpened glass.

"I'm sorry, Anastasia," she whispered. Then she looked at Timur.

His eye had fully swollen shut now, but he was looking at her with something akin to affection.

I had this weird, heavy sensation that settled deep in me.

“I’m sorry, darling,” my mother whispered, and it was so strange hearing her say any kind of endearment to me since she never had before.

“What are you sorry about?” I whispered back, realizing I was unable to move, as if my feet were rooted to the spot.

“Vladimir was away in Moscow, and Timur had been left to guard me. I knew that if I couldn’t give Vladimir what he wanted, I’d be useless to him and he’d find someone else. So I did what I had to in order to survive.” She squeezed her eyes shut.

Horrifying realization filled me as I looked at Timur.

“Vladimir had wanted a baby for years, and it being my duty as his wife to give it to him, we tried. I endured sleeping with him, praying it would take because there was nothing more I wanted than to get him off my back. Literally and figuratively.”

There was that anger in my mother I recognized so well.

“When I brought up seeing a specialist because maybe he couldn’t have kids, he made sure to show me why he’d been named a death dealer. He showed me exactly how sadistic he was as he raped me repeatedly, telling me he’d get me pregnant one way or another, or I was no good to him.”

I covered my mouth with a hand.

“He left for Moscow the next morning and was gone for months, leaving me alone like I was nothing but a piece of his property.”

I didn’t know whether to be empathetic toward my mother because she clearly had to do what she did to survive, or to be utterly disgusted that I was created as a pawn, a bargaining chip for my mother’s life.

“It was after a month had gone by after Vladimir had left that I knew I had to do something. And I saw the perfect opportunity. Timur stayed back to guard me. I plied him with wine one night. We got drunk. And we had sex. I knew he’d keep his mouth shut or Vladimir would’ve slit his throat and watched him bleed out on the ground.” She glanced at Timur for only a second. “I also knew he cared for me. He didn’t hide it well, which made seducing him easy.”

My father made a disgusted noise.

“And I kept sleeping with Timur until I got pregnant, which had only taken a handful of times. So my suspicions were right about Vladimir.” The

horror in my mother's face was slowly vanishing as I could practically feel her being transported back to that time as she looked at my father. "Vladimir was shooting blanks, but was too much of an arrogant, misogynistic male in thinking he could never have issues."

The next moment happened so fast I was left reeling.

My father pulled the trigger, putting a bullet right through my mother's temple.

Her head cracked to the side, blood and flesh and brain matter splattering across the floor. My mouth was open and I was pretty sure I was screaming, but I couldn't hear anything.

I looked at my father… no, not my father. Not biologically, and no longer in the figurative sense. Not after what he'd done to Kostya, and now to my mother, who lay slumped over in the chair, blood dripping from the bullet wound out of the side of her head.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

I stared at that puddle of red, viscous fluid that started to grow and spread, covering the Persian rug my mother had picked out last summer. I realized I was crying as I lifted my head and looked back at Timur. He stared at me with anguish that I felt spread out and wrap around me.

"I never wanted you to find out, not like this." He shook his head. "I didn't know you were mine at first," Timur said in a strangled voice that finally pierced through my brain. "She confided in me after you were born after a particularly nasty fight with Vladimir. We were overheard, and you now know the rest."

A shuddering breath left me as I thought back to what Vladimir had said about one of the servants confiding in a soldier, who then told him.

God, I thought the situation with Kostya had been bad, which it was, but now there was this thrown in and I was thrust into a deeper level of hell.

It was too much, the nausea rising too fast. I sat down on the floor, brushing away the tears that were steadily falling down my cheeks.

I looked at the man who raised me, the man I called Papa. He wasn't who I thought he was. He never had been.

I knew he loved me… up until he found out this revelation. The way he looked at me now, the truth between us that I wasn't his, and his focus on me that was absolutely menacing, was filled with so much hatred that I actually pushed myself backward.

“Breaks my fucking heart to do this, *dorogaya moya*, but I’ll look weak if I don’t handle the betrayal at all angles.” He took a step closer. “And truth be told, I can never look at you the same knowing how you were conceived and how I was betrayed. I’m going to put a bullet in your head, Anastasia. And I’m going to make your father and your lover watch.”

He spat out “father” as if it were a vile word.

“And then I’m going to kill Timur.” Vladimir lifted the gun and every part of me wanted to fight back, but the shock filled me so hard I could barely even breathe. “It’ll cause problems killing Ruin since he brings in so much money for the Bratva, but I’ll deal with that when the time comes.”

I couldn’t move, the wall to my back, the air frigid in my lungs.

Vladimir was only a few feet from me now, and although I knew he would follow through with this, I could also see a flicker of regret on his face. But it was masked as fast as it had come.

There was no hope for me, no praying that he would come to see that it didn’t matter if I wasn’t biologically his, that he raised me, called me *daughter,* loved me.

“I am sorry,” he said before he swallowed roughly. I closed my eyes tightly, expecting a bullet to slam into me, but I heard a deep grunt followed by the clatter of something heavy hitting the ground.

I opened my eyes to see Kostya on the ground with my father, both of them grappling before Kostya easily got the upper hand. He straddled my father, who lay on his back, raining down blows against his head.

I’d never seen such violence firsthand, but the pure look of evil that came from Kostya had my blood running cold. They were on their feet seconds later, and I quickly reached for the gun that fell from my father’s hand.

Vladimir pulled a knife on him, so quickly all I saw was the flash of the blade catching the firelight a second before Vladimir plunged it into Kostya’s side.

He grunted and stumbled back, his hand going to his ribs, blood pooling between his fingers.

He cursed vile things in Russian to Vladimir, things that pertained to gutting and pulling out his entrails, gouging out his eyes, and cutting off his dick.

The next sequence of events happened only within a millisecond of each other as Vladimir bared his teeth and pushed himself up. Kostya slammed

his body into my father, causing both of them to careen backward and crash into the wall.

I watched as Vladimir lifted the knife, and before he could plunge into Kostya, I did something I never thought I'd ever do.

I pointed the gun just as they broke apart and pulled the trigger on the man I had called Papa for the past twenty-three years.

With the force of the gun going off and me not being wholly prepared had my shoulders jerking back, I gasped in shock and pain and stumbled back.

And then I was staring into the lifeless eyes of the man I'd called *Father.* But I felt nothing. I was numb. And it was welcome.

I didn't know how long I stood there, probably only seconds, but it felt like an eternity. I heard my name being shouted, felt heavy hands on my shoulders.

I blinked over and over again, tilting my head back to look into Kostya's face. His expression couldn't be called anything but tormented. I was vaguely aware of him taking the gun from me and tucking it in the waistband at the small of his back.

His mouth was moving but I couldn't hear anything.

Kostya smoothed the hair away from my face, touched my cheek, and looked over at where Vladimir lay. He turned his attention to where my mother sagged lifelessly, and then finally looked at Timur.

My heart was racing so fast it was physically painful and I lifted a hand to place over it, realizing that my fingers shook, and that this cold chill started to seep deep into my bones, settling into my marrow.

Kostya glanced back at me, lifted his hand to cup my cheek, and smoothed his thumb right under my eye. I felt the warm stickiness of his blood that covered his fingers and palm coat my skin, smelled the coppery tinge of it. But I didn't care.

He lowered his face so we were eye to eye, his mouth still moving, but I couldn't hear anything. God, why couldn't I hear?

"Baby." His deep voice finally penetrated through. "You're in shock. It's okay. It's okay, sweetheart."

A harsh groan from the other side of the room had Kostya looking at Timur. I could see him struggling against his bonds.

Everything was still moving in slow motion as Kostya stepped away from me, pulled that gun out from the waistband of his pants, cocked it,

then aimed at Timur.

And then reality crashed back into me so hard it was painful, like my body slamming into cement after jumping from a building.

“No,” I said softly at first, breathlessly. But then I was shouting it. *Nononono*. I gripped Kostya’s bulging bicep, digging my nails into his flesh. I felt reality continue to slam into me.

He looked at me, his brows pulled down low, the very clear need for him to deliver violence tangible around him.

“No more death. No more.”

Despite the gunshots, I knew nobody would come in here. My father’s men would assume he was delivering the vengeance that was due to him.

Oh, God. I killed a Pakhan. The realization of what I’d done hit me so powerfully the room grew too hot. “They’ll kill me.” I looked at my father, my eyes feeling so wide they hurt.

“No one is hurting you again,” Kostya said in a deep, hard voice. There was so much determination in his words that it was like cement filling me, solidifying any hollow, open, and dead place that I had.

And I knew without a doubt that what he said was true.

“Go. Take her away from here. Protect her.” It was Timur who spoke, his words gruff as if it were hard for him to force them out.

He was breathing roughly as he stared at Timur, clearly having an internal war going on inside of him on what he wanted to do.

Which was to kill.

Kostya was clearly trying to control the basic, primal need to let that violent beast out.

Finally he scrubbed a hand over his face and exhaled before tucking the gun in the waistband at the small of his back.

I felt the relief instantly and limped toward Timur, my ankle screaming in pain as I held in my tears. I covered my mouth as my gag reflex took hold when I looked at my mother’s corpse. I stepped around the puddle of her blood, needing to untie Timur.

But with the zip ties, there was no way I could do it on my own. A second later, Kostya was there with Vladimir’s knife and cutting Timur free.

Timur stood, walked over to my father, and stared down at his lifeless body. He muttered something inaudible in Russian, but I didn’t need to know the words to understand they’d been vile. His expression said it all.

I took note of how he favored one side of his body with every move he made, and saw the numerous puncture wounds littering his dress shirt, blood making the white fabric now pink.

Honestly I didn't even know how he was still standing. Kostya immediately had me engulfed in his arms and I sagged against him, suddenly feeling so exhausted.

"There have been things set in motion concerning a new Pakhan." Timur looked over his shoulder at me. "Believe me when I say Vladimir won't be missed."

I didn't know how to take that but felt Kostya's arms tighten around me.

Timur looked at him then and said, "I'm sorry for what they did to you as a boy. I'm sorry I had any part of that, even if it was just knowing it was happening and didn't stop it."

I'd always thought there was this hatred and animosity between Kostya and Timur. *And now I know why.* Timur knew about the abuse Kostya was enduring and didn't say or do anything to stop it.

And because of that, in my eyes, Timur was just as guilty as the men who had physically hurt Kostya.

"Now go. Take the staff hallways and back door. Vladimir let them go home early so there isn't anyone here but the few soldiers that brought us in."

Because of the death he'd planned on raining down.

Timur watched me, so many things passing between us that would forever be unsaid.

And I was okay with that. I didn't have a family any longer.

I only had Kostya.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-SIX

Anastasia

We'd been off grid for a week but I knew Kostya was still in touch with the Bratva, or more specifically with Timur.

He took phone calls at all hours, his voice too low for me to ever pick up on anything clear, the conversation always in guttural Russian.

He wouldn't tell me anything, wouldn't divulge what was happening or what would happen. And although part of me didn't want to know anything that happened after my father's death… that I caused… I also didn't want to be totally in the dark.

It was frightening.

I had killed Vladimir and felt it was in my right to know things that normally I shouldn't have been privy to.

For the first couple of days after we left, we'd done nothing but drive and mostly in silence.

And I'd been so tired, thankful that Kostya didn't coddle me or try to make me feel like everything would be okay.

It was as if I hadn't slept for days on end, my body completely drained of any energy as I slept curled up in the front seat of his SUV, not knowing where we were going but also not caring. Not to mention my ankle was swollen and aching, the sprain making even the simplest task of walking unbearable.

I knew I should care about all my responsibilities, but I was so mentally drained that I just… didn’t. I had my job at the dance company, my apartment and belongings and bills to pay. At least I’d had enough sense to call the studio from a burner phone, explained I had an injury and was getting it looked at. Not a lie but also not the truth. They’d mentioned contacting them the following week, talked about therapy and rehab once I was back, and that my position would be held until we figured things out.

I’d then sent a quick text to Katarina saying the same thing.

We’d driven farther and farther away from the city, away from Desolation. I hadn’t asked any questions, knowing that maybe I was still in shock over everything.

I stared out the passenger side window as we passed towns, intimate communities with tiny populations. Civilization became thinner, sparser, the longer we drove and I started to feel that anxiety fade out.

Being around anyone right now seemed like absolute hell, and maybe that was why Kostya was taking us so far away. Because he knew.

We’d stopped off nightly at little hole-in-the-wall motels off the beaten path, which was where we currently were and had been for the past two days.

I couldn’t say the motel was the most comfortable place to stay, what with the outdated interior, the water-stained ceiling, the ancient television that only picked up three channels, or the fact we’d been living off vending machines or fast food, but I was with Kostya and it was pretty perfect.

I hadn’t really slept much after we moved from motel to motel, but when I did manage to fall asleep, it was with Kostya’s big body curled around mine and the feel of his fingers skating up and down my arm before I finally drifted off.

I ran my hand over the mirror above the bathroom sink, the glass cracked in the corner, gold veins spidering across the length.

I stared at my reflection—my long dark hair was damp and hung in loose waves over my shoulders. I straightened and tightened the too-thin towel around me, the material feeling like sandpaper.

At least I had some decent toiletries, thanks to Kostya stopping at a drugstore to grab some essentials.

I closed my eyes and braced my hands on the edge of the bathroom sink. I hated how things were between us right now.

He was distant, and aside from holding me at night, he hadn't touched me. And I *ached* for him. Especially now, with our futures uncertain, with the fact I killed the man I thought was my father, the man I loved and had looked up to… I missed Kostya.

A part of me knew he had a lot on his mind, a lot of things that were in play regarding both of our safeties and making sure the chess pieces were lined up just right before any new moves could be played.

But, God, it was hard.

I opened my eyes and stared at the closed toilet seat lid, at the sweats and plain white T-shirt that lay atop it. Another quick purchase at a cheap convenience store we had passed.

I should put them on. I really should, but instead I turned and opened the bathroom door, shut off the light, and then stood there and stared at Kostya. I glanced down at my ankle, the skin mottled in shades of purple and blue, any little pressure put on it enough to suck the air from my lungs. I tried to hide the pain as much as possible because I saw the tightening on Kostya's face when he saw my discomfort.

We had enough to worry about rather than issues with my ankle.

He sat at the small circular table that was positioned in front of the single window in the room. He was cleaning his guns, something he did every night before bed, I took a note of. Since my time with him, I noticed Kostya stuck to routines, regimes, and rituals, and it didn't take much for me to realize it stemmed from his abuse.

That was why I never said anything. I kept my mouth shut, and I sat on the edge of the bed and watched him until he finished up, undressed, then took me down to the bed with him and held me until I fell asleep.

I knew he did that for me just as much as he did it for him.

That was the only controlled moment we had anymore, it seemed.

"Is that how you earned money?" I asked softly.

"Is what how I earned money, baby?" He didn't look at me as he finished cleaning his gun and putting it back together.

"Being forced to fight for the Bratva. Being forced to kill for them."

It took him so long to respond, I was sure he wouldn't. Then he set his gun aside and leaned back in the tattered tweed chair, his huge body seeming relaxed even though I knew he was anything but.

"That's how I made money, *malishka*."

He stayed silent for long seconds, and I couldn’t look away. I didn’t want to let my emotions consume me over the fact that the Bratva had used him the way they had, or that he probably never thought he had any other choice in the matter.

Sure, he was powerful and deadly, could kill with his bare hands, but when you were conditioned to do something over and over again for nearly as long as you’d been alive, it just became your normal.

I tried not to take notice of how good he looked wearing nothing but a pair of jeans, hanging low on his hips, his abdomen tight and ribbed with muscle, his pectorals defined, his arms positively huge.

And then there were all those tattoos. He was gorgeous. Beautiful. And I most certainly shouldn’t be thinking these lewd thoughts about how he looked naked, and how he felt inside of me.

It had just been so long since he touched me the way I desperately needed him to.

I moved forward and came to a stop in front of him, but didn’t miss the way he watched me limp closer, how his eyes became darker, his mouth thinner. He was my protector.

I didn’t know why his focus affected me so much, but I felt my nipples tighten and gripped the terrycloth towel that covered me.

I found myself moving closer and closer still until I stopped a couple of feet from him. He looked so unaffected as he stared at me, but I could see the rapid beat of his pulse at the base of his throat that told me he was getting just as worked up as I was.

And when I glanced down at his lap and saw he was hard, his cock a thick, long rod hidden behind his jeans, I felt my breath start to come out a little quicker.

“Why haven’t you touched me?”

“I have. I hold you every night, sweetheart.”

I could see on his face he was purposefully trying to appear like this moment didn’t affect him. I knew it did.

“You know what I mean,” I whispered. His fingers dug tightly into the faded and worn fabric of the armrests.

He wanted me but he was fighting it.

I loosened my hold on the towel, allowing the cloth to pool at my feet, letting Kostya see every part of me. He didn’t waste a second letting his gaze travel up and down my body, his focus landing on my bare pussy, then

over my abdomen, finally looking at my breasts, before staring back into my eyes.

But still he looked like he was almost… bored.

And truth be told, I found his indifference to me standing naked in front of him such a turn-on.

“Don’t you want me anymore?” Those words were hard as hell to push past my lips.

“Come closer, sweetheart,” he murmured, his voice so rough and deep, cutting over me like a blade. I wanted him to open me up. I wanted him to bare every part of me until there was no me or him. There was just us.

I didn’t move those last couple of inches to bring me right in front of him to where my legs brushed his, to where his scent would envelop me and all I could feel and scent was Kostya.

“You think I don’t want you?”

I ran my tongue over my bottom lip and slowly shook my head. “I don’t know what to think after everything.” My voice caught at the end. I didn’t want to break down. I’d done enough of that over the last week, stealing away into the bathroom to cry silently in the shower, hoping Kostya didn’t hear.

He leaned forward and braced his forearms on his thighs, staring up at me with dark, unreadable eyes. “I’ve never been as starved when you’re near, then when the very thought of you crosses my mind.” He sucked on his teeth for a second before lowering his focus and staring for long moments right at my pussy. “I’m ravenous for you.” He flicked his gaze back to my face. “Now, come here and let me show you how much.”

I took a step closer.

He reached out and curled his hand around my waist, digging his fingers into my flesh that I gasped in pain. My pussy got wetter, my arousal coating my inner thighs so they slicked together.

“I’m going to leave marks on you.” He dug his fingers into me harder, proving his point.

“Yes,” I whisper-moaned.

“I want there to be marks so I can look at your naked body, run my fingers over the purple and blue marks that mar your pale flesh, and know you’re mine.”

He yanked me forward until I stumbled and had to brace my hands on his wide, muscular shoulders.

“Climb up here, baby. Straddle me.”

I glanced down at his crotch, watched as he used a free hand to pop the button of his jeans undone, then pulled down the zipper.

My heart felt like it was a tiny bird fluttering in my chest as I climbed up and did what he said, my legs on either side of him, the width of the chair too small to allow much of any movement.

Aside from going up and down as I fucked myself on him.

I kept my focus on his hard cock, the tip glossy as pre-cum was a constant out of the slit.

“Lower down a bit more, sweetheart.”

I felt a bead of pussy juice slip down one of my inner thighs, but obeyed. When I was low enough I could feel the heat from his shaft.

I didn’t know what I expected, but it wasn’t Kostya slapping the head of his dick on my clit, the wet sound of flesh hitting flesh pulling a moan from me.

He slid his hand up to curve his big palm around a breast. He thumbed my nipple, tweaked it, pulled the tip tight until I gasped in pain.

“Say the words.”

I couldn’t stop the little mewl that came from me at how much I loved when he ordered me around like this, when he was dominating and wanting me to obey him without question.

With a little pressure on my waist, he pulled me forward until my chest was to his, our lips barely touching. “Tell me what I want to fucking hear, Ana, baby.”

“I’m yours.”

He made a sound of clear pleasure. “And what else?”

I closed my eyes just as I felt him lick my lips a second before he bit my bottom lip and pulled on the flesh.

“No one will ever touch me but you.”

He had his hand loosely around my throat and slowly started to add pressure. I snapped my eyes open when he pulled me back so I could stare into his eyes.

“That’s fucking right.” He bared his teeth. “You’re only mine.” The sound of our rapid breathing surrounded us. “Now reach down and put my big cock into your tight little cunt and let me show you how much I want you.”

He stared into my eyes.

“Let me show you that the only reason I’ve stayed away this past week was because I didn’t trust myself with you, didn’t want to rush you so that I broke whatever softness you still had after all that shit.” He smoothed his hand over my cheek. “*Krasavitsa*. I heard you crying in the shower every night. You can’t imagine how much I wanted to go in there and hold you.” He smoothed his thumb under my eyes. “You can’t imagine how many times I stopped myself from going and killing someone and bringing you their heart as an offering so you’d have a semblance of relief that pain was inflicted on others.”

He leaned in and kissed me softly, almost sweetly. Well, as sweetly as a man like Kostya could give.

“Now use me, sweetheart. Use me until you don’t feel anything but me taking care of you.”

I couldn’t breathe as I realized I needed to *feel* Kostya. He groaned when I gripped the thick stalk of his cock and dragged my palm up and down, twisting my palm over the crown and smearing the pre-cum over the bulbous tip.

I aligned him at the entrance of my body, and while staring into his eyes, I sank down in one fast move that opened me up completely from the force, stretched me so wide I cried out in pain.

“Jesus Christ,” he gritted through clenched teeth.

The pain felt good. I wanted more of it. I lifted my hips up until just his cock head was in my body, then sank down. We both groaned and Kostya leaned back fully on the chair. The muscles in his chest flexed with the tension radiating from him.

I rode him then, rising up and sinking down, over and over again. I let my head fall back on my neck, my damp hair swinging back and forth against my spine, the pleasure and pain encompassing me until I didn’t know where I started and he stopped.

Smack!

I groaned when he swatted my ass.

“Again,” I moaned. My clit rubbed along the base of his dick every time I sank down on him.

Smack! Smack! Smack!

“Mine,” he snarled.

I was lost in the sensations, the sounds our bodies made together, the scent of Kostya, and the feel of the pain and pleasure he gave me.

God, I was close.

I curled my hands around his biceps and rode him, working my pussy over his cock, keeping the pressure on my knees and off my feet and ankles. My pussy was so wet, the sloppy sounds of us fucking filling the small interior of the motel room.

And then his mouth was at my throat, his teeth digging into the side of my neck as he bit me and growled. He curled his hands so tight into my hips that I groaned at the thought of the bruises he'd leave on me.

And I wanted them. I wanted that primal mark from Kostya.

I started moaning loudly and should've been ashamed by the sounds coming from me, but I couldn't stop them. And the rough, animalistic noises that came from deep within Kostya's chest fueled me on.

He curled his hands around the cheeks of my ass, holding me tight, pulling me forward so I was grinding on his thick cock every time I sank back down and took all of him.

Smacksmacksmack.

He spanked me over and over again as he continued to bite and lick at the side of my throat, sinking his teeth deep but not breaking the skin, and then dragging his tongue over the sensitive spot that he gave me.

"I'm so close." Those words spilled out of me almost incoherently and I felt a tear track out of the corner of my eye and down my cheek.

He leaned forward and dragged his tongue over the side of my face, licking away the tears.

When his mouth was by my ear, he whispered, "Be my good girl and come for me, sweetheart."

I came so powerfully stars danced in front of my eyes. The world exploding around me in shapes and colors and sensations.

And then the world was turning upside down, and I made a surprised noise as he stood suddenly and moved us to the bed. He set me on the center of the mattress and my body bounced once, twice, my legs falling open as he stood in front of me, his massive cock now in his hand, the length so glossy from being inside of me.

And then he was on me again, using his big body to shove my thighs open even more before he slid his hands up and curled them around the back of my knees. He forced the tops of my thighs to my chest.

He leaned down and gently—God, so sweetly—kissed my bruised and injured ankle.

That was where his gentleness started and stopped because a second later, he slammed his mouth against mine, thrust his tongue past my lips and forced me to kiss him in the best way. While he mouth-fucked me, he notched the tip of his cock back at my entrance and pushed in deep. Brutally.

He broke the kiss but left his lips pressed against mine as he made an animalistic sound, “Say my name as I fuck you.”

He was throwing his hips back and forth between mine, fucking me so hard I was moving up the bed. The only thing keeping me stationary was his hand on my shoulder, his fingertips digging into my flesh.

“Kostya,” I moaned and tipped my head back, the pleasure rising higher and higher so I knew I wouldn’t be able to chase it. I’d be left in its wake.

He licked at my mouth, dragging his tongue over my lips before plunging in and out and then moving down to suck a nipple into his mouth. He alternated between the tips, biting them roughly before soothing away the sting with his tongue. And all the while he never stopped fucking me.

“Again, give it to me again,” he demanded.

I came for my roughened fighter, my inner muscles milking him until he was leaning that big, male body back, gripping my inner thighs, and watching as he sank in and out of me.

“I’m going to fill you up, make you take every single drop of my cum.” A low rumble left him, sweat dripping off his face. I noticed he still wore his jeans, that he’d been so frantic for me he hadn’t even bothered getting fully undressed.

“I’m going to bathe you from the inside out.”

One thrust. Two. Three. He stilled, burying himself deep in my cunt as he slammed his hands on either side of my head and came.

He stared into my eyes the entire time as he came. I felt his cock jerk inside of me, felt the hot, thick jets of his cum fill me until it was slipping out from where we were connected.

When he came down from his climax, he sagged his head and breathed in and out harshly. He pulled out of me so suddenly a soft cry of disappointment left me.

But it was the feeling of his fingers smoothing over my sore pussy that had me opening my eyes and watching as he smeared his cum along my lips before pushing his fingers back into me, making sure every drop of him stayed inside of me.

“Hold me,” I whispered. Kostya only moved away long enough to take off his jeans, and then he was lying beside me and pulling the blanket over us.

“Everything is going to be okay. I’ll make sure of it.”

And then he held me until I fell asleep.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-SEVEN

Anastasia

Kostya had been speaking the truth when he'd told me everything would be okay.

It was only a few days after our motel encounter where he'd marked up my neck and waist to the point I got high when I saw them in the mirror.

Maybe there was something wrong with me to get pleasure in seeing physical aspects of his dominance littering my body, but if it was wrong I didn't want to be right.

He'd gotten a phone call from Timur twenty minutes ago, and ever since then Kostya had done more listening than talking.

I didn't ask about the conversation, or any of them he had—presumably all with Timur—because I knew if Kostya wanted me to know he would tell me.

But it wasn't as if I didn't have my own inner issues to deal with, like the fact I was still processing that I killed the person I'd known as my father, that my mother was murdered right in front of me, and that my actual biological father was the man Kostya was currently speaking with.

"Just like that?"

The sound of Kostya's voice was sharp and drew me out of my thoughts. I watched as he paced the small motel room we were currently in.

This was the second one in the past three days, slightly more updated than the last one, but still giving off "Vacancy" vibes.

My ankle wasn’t getting any better, much to my horror. What I first thought was a nasty sprain was turning into something deeper. But I hadn’t been to a doctor to verify anything—for obvious reasons—so elevation, icing it, and Kostya refusing to let me walk on my own anywhere, and instead carrying me to where I needed to go, was how it was being handled.

Not ideal, but I’d be lying if I didn’t admit being cared for by my big, strong fighter, and seeing this softer side of him wasn’t something I was complaining about.

And I was pretty sure the chair and then bed sex we’d done days ago hadn’t helped the situation. But then again I wouldn’t have changed it.

It was that moment that had broken through the shock I’d been feeling and let reality crash back in. It had been painful. It had been rough and scary. But I’d come out on the other end okay and breathing.

“I won’t risk her safety for anything.” There was a long moment of silence before Kostya cut his gaze in my direction and gave a noncommittal grunt. “She isn’t going anywhere near you. If anything happens to her, I’ll cut your head from your neck with a dull knife.”

Kostya disconnected the call and shoved the burner in the back pocket of his jeans. He ran a hand over his short dark hair, still pacing as he stared at the floor.

I lifted my brows and said, “Well? Can you please fill me in?” He stopped and looked at me, an unreadable expression on his face. “I understand you enjoy me being in the dark because you think it’ll keep me safe, but given the fact this concerns me as well, I want to know what the hell is going on.”

I held out my hands in surrender although I wasn’t being submissive. I felt like I was on edge, teetering close to a cliff, knowing that if I fell over there was no chance of me surviving.

I had to know what the next steps were.

“This is my life, Kostya. This is our lives. No more silence on it.”

He exhaled and nodded, and for a second, I found my eyes widening and shock filling me.

That seemed so… easy.

He was always so hard, unyielding, obviously used to getting his way, that the fact he was giving in—agreeing with me—almost had a hysterical laugh bubbling up in my throat.

Maybe it looked like I was about to lose it because Kostya was kneeling right in front of me a second later, cupped each side of my face in his big, warm tattooed hands, and leaned in to rest his forehead against mine.

For a moment, we just breathed the same air. I let that creep into me, let the steady feel of his strength surround me, knowing I was stabilizing him as much as he was me.

It was only after a moment or so when he exhaled and pulled back, gazing into my eyes.

“Timur wants me to come to Desolation for a meeting. He wants to talk to me about what’s going to happen next.”

“Okay. This is a good thing, right?” His expression was unreadable.

“Maybe. Or maybe it’s a setup.”

I was shaking my head before he stopped. “Even I know that’s not how the Bratva operates when they want things taken care of.”

He huffed out a laugh. “No, but there’s new leadership, or so Timur tells me. That means things could be a clusterfuck right now. Tensions are high. Shit isn’t running smoothly.”

I started worrying my bottom lip at the very idea of them ambushing Kostya. Although he was the most powerful and deadly person I knew, that didn’t mean he was invincible.

It was my turn to reach out and cup his scruff-covered cheek, trying to ease him like he had with me. He looked a little surprised at first, just a flicker of emotion that was so rare in him.

“But I’ve been speaking with Timur this past week, and I don’t think that’s how things will play out. Although I didn’t see a lot of shit happening like it had.”

He looked frustrated with that, and I knew a man like Kostya was used to his rigorous routine.

“No one is ever going to hurt you again.” He slowly shook his head, and I felt him ever so slightly lean in to my touch. “But you’re not coming with me.”

That was instantly like cold water being poured on me, and my attitude immediately went sour. I dropped my hand from his face and back into my lap, his sigh telling me he probably had seen this coming but wasn’t going to budge.

“Why?”

“You know why. It’s not safe.”

“I’m coming.” I said it with determination. “This is my life too, and whatever Timur has to say affects me. He is my biological father.”

“I’m not going to put you in danger, and even if Timur is your biological father, even if I can believe him that he’d never allow anything to hurt you, I’m not risking it.” At my look, his jaw clenched. “No, baby.”

“If not now, then when? When will you ever feel like it’s safe—”

“—fucking never,” he said, cutting me off.

It was my turn to clench my jaw.

“Your father had many allies, as well as enemies. Just because he’s dead doesn’t mean their loyalties or their grudges don’t persist, no matter what Timur said or how he tried to assure me.”

“So he wants to see me?”

Kostya snorted and rose, going back to pacing. “Of course he fucking wants to see you. He’s living in some fucking fantasy world where you two get to know each other, where he gets to be a father.”

“That won’t ever happen.” Kostya stopped and looked at me, a dark brow cocked. “He didn’t do anything to stop your abuse. He stood by and watched it happen. In my eyes, he’s as guilty as the men who laid hands on you. In fact, I’d planned on cutting Vladimir out of my life for the same reason.”

He was silent for long moments after I said that, and I didn’t know how to take his reaction to my truth.

“I can’t associate with anyone who willingly hurt you or let the abuse continue. I can’t,” I whispered.

It was my turn to shake my head. “You won’t let anything hurt me. I won’t let anyone hurt you. See how that works in a relationship?”

The corner of his mouth kicked up. “Is that what we’re in… a relationship?”

I felt my cheeks heat and glanced down. I felt his finger under my chin as he lifted my head.

“What would you call it?” I whispered.

“What I feel for you goes beyond any manmade word that could describe it. It’s a virus in me… one I don’t want to heal from, sweetheart.”

I wasn’t sure how to take the whole virus comparison, but I supposed to a man like Kostya that was as close to a profession of love as I’d get.

“Pretty intense.” My heart stuttered in my chest.

“Yeah,” was all he said.

He was silent for so long, his dark eyes hard, his expression emotionless. “You’re not going to budge on coming with me, are you?”

“No. I’m not.” He exhaled and ran a hand through his hair again. I didn’t show it, but I was smiling inside because I knew he’d given me this one win.

Whether he didn’t want to deny me, or he knew the truth of what I said and that it was safe, Kostya was going to take me with him, and I was going to look Timur in the eye and figure out what the hell was going on with our lives.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-EIGHT

Ruin

I was growing weak where Anastasia was concerned. Some would call me pussy-whipped. I called it acting like I finally had the woman who meant absolutely everything to me and who was now irrevocably mine. Because short of death, nothing would tear her from me.

I didn't want her here with me, the protective part of me needing to shelter her so she never lost her innocence. But I could also see her point of view, even if I didn't care to indulge her in it because it went against that protective streak I had.

But I would, because whether she knew it or not, Anastasia fucking owned every part of me.

And I'd known I was going to have a fight on my hands as soon as we pulled up to Anastasia's childhood home and I had decided no fucking way was she going in there with me. The fact Timur decided to make Vladimir's house his own pissed me off and made me want to kill him ten times over. Arrogant motherfucker.

I'd been about to tell her that I demanded her gorgeous ass stay in the car while I dealt with this, when I'd gotten a phone call from Timur assuring me he'd cleared out the house to ensure Anastasia was safe. That would also work out nicely with the second part of why I was here.

I might not like the asshole, but he was smart, because if he'd even left one bastard in there I'd have no issues putting a bullet right between everyone's eyes.

And so here we were, standing in what was formerly Vladimir's office, Timur looking like a smug prick as he sat behind the massive desk like a king on his throne.

"Quit fucking looking at her," I snapped and took a step to the side, putting my body in front of Anastasia's. She curled her hand around my bicep, and I looked over my shoulder and down at her.

"It's fine," she whispered. "Let's not start this off on the wrong foot, okay?"

I knew I was dominating as fuck, an asshole on the best of days, and wouldn't be winning any personality contests. Hell, I'd beat the shit out of any contestant who stood on stage with me during the latter.

And as much as I wanted a part of me to be softer *for her*… I couldn't. Protecting her in the most vicious manner was the only way I wanted things to go.

I hadn't told her the other reason I'd agreed to come here and speak with this asshole. But she'd find out soon enough whether Timur and the Bratva would "allow" it to happen.

I let my gaze land on the wall clock briefly. They'd be arriving any minute, which made me antsy as fuck because having Anastasia around the bastards was at the top of my "no fucking way" list.

But if I had a chance of things going the way I needed them to, there was no other option.

When I didn't move and still felt tense as hell, she gave me that soft, sweet smile that melted a fraction of whatever ice had permanently embedded itself around my heart.

"It's fine. He's just as curious as I am. This whole situation is confusing."

I glanced back at Timur and could see he was still trying to look at her. I growled low and he focused on me, leaning back further in Vladimir's office chair.

I cocked an eyebrow and crossed my arms over my chest. "Looks like you've made yourself at fucking home." I flicked a disgusted look toward the desk and how he was spread out behind it, looking like some kind of regal fucking Pakhan. I let my gaze roam over what I could see of him. The bastard was even sporting a black custom Armani suit just like Vladimir always used to wear.

But it didn’t matter to me if Timur was acting boss. Because I didn’t give a shit about anything but protecting Anastasia.

“If you threaten Anastasia or I have an inkling that you plan on double crossing us, I’ll slit your throat and think about the consequences with the Bratva later.”

He inclined his head. “Fair enough. But there’s no worries on that. I don’t want to hurt Anastasia. She’s my daughter.”

I made a dangerous sound in my throat.

“I guess let’s get down to it then.”

“What’s going on with the Vladimir situation?”

Timur ran a hand over his freshly shaved cheek. “Taken care of,” he said dismissively. “He was on his way out anyway. I’d been speaking with the higher ups for a while now, was told to watch Vladimir. I reported back that he was taking bigger chances, and then when you were taken,” Timur addressed Anastasia, “it was the nail in his coffin. He wasn’t following orders, and was going rogue.” He shrugged. “So it’s done and no one is to blame. In fact, Moscow sees it as a personal favor that he was dealt with. You both are in the clear.”

I could sense the tension coming from Anastasia and wanted to break Timur’s nose for making her feel this way.

“I want nothing to do with you.” Anastasia spoke up then, clearly surprising Timur with the change of subject, or maybe with her words in general. He sat up straighter in his chair and glanced at her as she stepped out from the protection of my body.

I stayed close and kept my focus on Timur, but let her have this moment.

“Sorry, but I just wanted to get that out of the way.”

A long moment of silence stretched out, and I could see the wheels in Timer’s head moving. The fucker actually thought he’d had any kind of chance at having a relationship with my girl.

“Just like that?” Timur finally said. He was good at masking his emotions, but I’d been trained to dig deeper and see what others wanted hidden. And the fucker hadn’t thought she’d freeze him out.

I heard Ana swallow and noticed she was twisting her hands in front of her. My strong girl was nervous but holding her ground. Fuck, I was proud of her.

“Just like that,” she finally said. “I can’t have a relationship with someone who would willingly stand back and let heinous, awful things happen to an innocent boy.” Her voice was rising the more she spoke. “I’d planned on cutting Vladimir out of my life because of that. You’re no different.”

Timur lifted his hand and ran the pad of his thumb over his bottom lip before sucking on his teeth. He held his hands out, palms up. “Fair enough.” He let his hands drop to the armrests of his chair. “Not what I planned, or ideal, but I can accept your decision… for now.”

I bared my teeth and came a step closer. “There is no ‘for now’ in this scenario. She wants nothing to do with you so that’s it. Final. The end of that story is fucking over with. You’ll stay away from her if you want to stay breathing.”

Timur smirked but was smart enough to keep his fucking mouth shut.

The truth was, even if she’d wanted to form a relationship with him, I wouldn’t have allowed it. She would have hated me for controlling that aspect of her life, but no fucking way would I let her have anything to do with this piece of shit.

He may have acted like he was on the better end of organized crime, which was laughable at best because there were no good men. But Timur was just as much a piece of shit as the rest of them.

Timur opened his mouth, but before he could speak an alarm went off on his phone. He pulled out his cell from his inner suit jacket pocket and glanced at the screen. He pulled his brows down low a second before they lifted to his hairline and he looked back at me.

“This is your doing?”

It was my turn to incline my head.

“What’s going on?” Ana’s voice was soft.

“It’s okay, sweetheart. Just chess pieces being moved.”

Timur slowly rose when the sound of someone entering the house sounded. He moved around the desk when heavy footsteps came closer. I shifted my body so I was once again in front of Anastasia and reached behind to wrap my arm around her waist.

We all faced the entrance to the office, and a second later the two men I’d asked to come over stepped through the entrance, cocky smirks already on their faces when they spotted us.

“Well, fuck, the tension in here is so uncomfortable that if I was a masochist I’d have a hard-on right now.” Dmitry moved a step forward, grinning from ear to ear. “But I’m a sadist through and through.”

Nikolai, his younger brother, stayed back, his hands tucked in the pockets of his leather jacket and his expression showing he’d rather be anywhere but here.

A long moment of silence stretched out and Timur looked over at me. “Seriously? Calling the Petrov brothers in?”

“Let’s get this over with,” Nikolai said and came closer. “I have a pretty wife at home who’s waiting for me to fuck her on the new mattress we just got.”

Anastasia made a strangled noise in the back of her throat.

“You want me to get this started, or have you already told him how things are going to go?” Dmitry said to me, then glanced at Timur to give him a slow smile. “You stink of that new car smell.”

Timur made an angry noise but knew pissing off the Pakhans of Desolation, New York, wouldn’t win him any points. The brothers had a lot of fucking connections, not just with the higher-ups in Moscow, but also because Nikolai’s new wife was tied to the Cosa Nostra.

“I’m pulling out of the underground shit,” I said, getting this over with. Timur turned to face me, and I felt Dmitry and Nikolai watching me as well. “I’m done with it. And I’ve called Dmitry and Nikolai in because they’ve got another fighter lined up to take my place.”

Timur’s jaw clenched as he stared at me. He’d grown a set of balls since putting on a designer suit.

“I have a beast ready to bathe in blood for the Bratva. And he actually wants to do this shit, not be kidnapped and brainwashed by pieces of shit that like hurting kids.” Dmitry stepped so close to Timur they were only a foot apart. “I’ve already spoken to Moscow, told them this is the better option. My guy is young, ready to make money for them, and let out the volatile rage he has bottled up.”

“You spoke to Moscow about this already, without bringing it up to me or the local levels?” Timur worded it carefully and kept his tone even. Safe.

Dmitry shrugged and smiled.

“We don’t need permission from you, a newbie Pakhan on a control trip, who doesn’t even know if he has shit in one hand or power in the other.” Nikolai stepped beside his brother and chuckled at Timur. “Soldier to

leader… quite the promotion.” He grinned like a shark. “We run Desolation, motherfucker, and have connections you couldn’t even comprehend. We have Moscow on our side, so—” Nikolai reached out and adjusted Timur’s tie aggressively, “—here’s what you’re going to do. You’re gonna look at Ruin, thank him for his time and service to the good cause, and then give us your gratitude for lining shit up and making your life easier.”

I saw Timur’s hands flex and relax, a muscle under his jaw ticking, and then he exhaled.

“I have to speak to Moscow, to the others in charge—”

“Talk to whoever the fuck you need to.” Dmitry cut him off. “It’s already done.” He pointed at me then. “Tell Ruin and your daughter to have a good night and that you wish them the best in life.”

Timur’s nostrils flared and I tensed, wanting the bastard to come after me so I could just be done with it and kill him. Timur looked over his shoulder at me for only a second before glancing at Anastasia. For a long moment, he just watched her and he didn’t mask the emotion on his face.

“All I ever wanted was for you to know you were mine—”

I stepped forward, not realizing I’d curled my hand around his throat or lifted him off the ground until we were nose to nose. “She was and *never* will be yours,” I snarled. “She’s fucking *mine*.”

“Let the bastard go,” Dmitry said in a calm voice.

I held his gaze for a second before unceremoniously dropping him to the ground and taking my place beside Anastasia.

“Go on, Ruin. Take your girl, leave, and don’t worry.” Nikolai was the one to speak. “We’ll handle Timur’s transition into knowing this is the only acceptable route.”

Every part of me wanted to go against the orders thrown my way, but I looked at Anastasia, saw she was staring up at me with those gorgeous big eyes of hers, and knew this wasn’t just about me.

This was all about her now. My life *was* for her.

I took her hand in mine, sneered at Timur as we passed him, then nodded at the Petrov brothers… the only gratitude I’d ever show anyone.

I left with the most important thing in my life close at my side.

I told myself I’d give Anastasia the happily ever after she fucking desired, even if that ending was with me… the beast who took her.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-NINE

Anastasia

Six months later

I always thought ballet was ingrained in every part of me, in my very DNA.

It had been for so long that the very thought of not doing it had never crossed my mind. It hadn't seemed feasible.

But then my entire world changed. I lost my family but had gained something far more important. And that was a new life. A new future. And finally having the only important thing in my life.

A future and happily ever after with Kostya.

Although the latter was certainly not in the traditional, conventional sense.

I knew he'd never be a functioning member of society. He'd never have a corporate job, would never work nine to five, or drink beers with the boys after a day on the job.

We'd never have the type of "normal" relationship other couples did, where we could laugh, share memories, sit on the couch on a Saturday evening and watch rom-coms while eating out of a pint of ice cream.

Our nights consisted of Kostya making sure the security system was working correctly, that his weapons were at the ready, and that his body was honed and cut to beast performance. And then he ended the night by fucking me with so much primal force, he was nothing but an animal. He'd growl I was his, making sure I couldn't walk straight the next day.

But I'd never want anything that took away from our "normal." Because I knew who and what Kostya—Ruin—was. He'd never be that boy I knew. And I loved him regardless.

Because although there was no going back, no bringing out that humanity he once had, each day I spent with him and with every little touch he gave me, I saw a little flicker of emotion in his eyes.

I'd see it when he looked at me, or when he dragged his thumb across my cheek, or when he told me that the boy I'd once known was still there, but buried deep inside.

Maybe one day he'd come out. But even if he didn't, I loved Kostya so much it consumed me. And I knew he felt the same way.

He was no longer doing the underground shit for the Russian mafia, but that didn't mean he was free and clear. Once you were in the Bratva, you were in. There was no getting out, no taking a break. It just… was.

But now he made his own decisions. I didn't know exactly what he did, didn't want to know, if I was being honest, but if I had to guess I could assume it was of the mercenary variety.

I pulled my car to a stop in front of the garage and killed the engine, just sitting there for a moment. Kostya's large, dark SUV with the blacked-out tinted windows sat in the space beside me.

Over the last six months so much had changed. So much. Although my ankle had healed, it wasn't one hundred percent, and therefore dancing professionally was no longer in my future.

But then again, I wasn't the same woman I was when I started. I had no fond memories of my mother to continue to want me to live out her legacy.

So I went down a new path, made my own story, and now was the proud owner of a small studio that specialized in music and dance therapy.

I was in the process of getting more certifications and training, and even started some online classes for my degree in therapy.

It was a long road and wouldn't happen overnight, but I had a good start with my background. And helping others find their strengths through their trauma, letting the music and dance flow through them and heal them from the inside out, was just as much for me as it was for them.

I hadn't spoken to Timur since we left him in Vladimir's office, but I was pretty sure Kostya spoke with him every now and then given they still ran in the same dangerous circles. I'd caught him a few times on the phone cursing out whoever was on the other end—Timur, presumably—and

caught the tail end of a conversation in which Kostya told the other person he'd never see me again so stop asking or he'd cut off his tongue.

Life certainly wasn't boring.

After grabbing the bag of takeout I picked up on the way home, I made my way toward the porch but stopped and looked at all we accomplished in just a short amount of time.

We moved out of the city and had gotten a small piece of property with an older house on it. Although we certainly weren't hurting for money, not with my inheritance from my family, and then finding out that Kostya had so much money he probably could have bought the city of Desolation, we'd decided to buy this fixer-upper.

And that was what we'd done over the last six months. Our home certainly wasn't extravagant, but it was ours and out of the grit and dirt of the city, away from the crime and hollowness that seemed to cling to Desolation and the surrounding area.

I stepped inside and immediately heard the deep bass of the stereo system in the basement coming through the floorboards. Kostya spent his time when we weren't together working out in the completely renovated basement that he had turned into a personal gym.

And although he wasn't fighting in the underground circuit anymore, I could sense this routine was still very much a part of him.

After setting my bags down and toeing off my shoes, I made my way to the basement, opened the heavy soundproof door Kostya had installed to mute the noise, and descended the stairs.

We'd immediately started doing work on the house as soon as we'd moved in. Whereas I did all the decorating and adding my personal touch to it, Kostya dealt with any major issues like flooring and windows, any big fixes, and updating the appliances. He also went the more hardcore route of installing the security.

Exterior infrared cameras. Industrial-sized locks on the doors. Even a tripwire set up around the property. Although Kostya had called it "necessary," I thought the panic room he installed in the master suite was a bit much, even overkill.

But if it made him feel more secure, who was I to judge or think he was being over the top and totally overprotective?

The door at the bottom of the stairs was open, and I leaned against the frame. The room was twelve hundred square feet of a gym nut's fantasy.

With an array of weights, blue mats scattered along the floor, and a bunch of other machinery that I couldn’t even begin to name, Kostya had his own professionally styled workout center right in our house.

I sighed out a very feminine sigh and felt my body instantly heat as I just appreciated the view.

He was in the center of the room bouncing around on the balls of his feet as he ducked and dodged the swinging red punching bag, slamming his fist into it over and over again.

He wore nothing but a pair of black nylon shorts hung low on his muscular, cut hips. Sweat covered every inch of his exposed skin, dripping down his limbs and chest and falling to the floor. God, that was hotter than it should have been.

Even with his back, arms, and legs covered in tattoos, I could see his muscles bunching and constricting. He was so utterly masculine, so ultra-powerful that it was hard to not become instantly aroused.

I shifted on my feet and did nothing but watch him. This… this did it for me.

The music was so loud I couldn’t think. Then again, who needed to think about anything when you were watching *that?*

He slammed his fist powerfully against the punching bag it swung wildly back and forth. He stopped and reached out to grab it, steadying it, his chest rising and falling harshly as he caught his breath.

And I knew the moment he was aware I was watching him. His shoulders rolled back, his knuckles turning white as he held on to the bag tighter.

He never wore protective gear, and I wondered if that was a lasting effect of how he’d been trained. It wasn’t exactly like underground cage fighting had regulation rules.

He slowly turned around, his head lowered, his eyes trained on me. He let his gaze travel up and down my body. Although I couldn’t hear anything but the angry, violent music he always listened to while he worked out, I swore I could hear his hum of approval.

I hadn’t bothered changing out of my leotard and leggings, the skintight material leaving nothing to the imagination. My nipples tightened and, as if it were a massive neon sign, Kostya looked at my breasts, his eyes seeming to grow heavier, darker.

He only watched me for a prolonged moment before he turned and walked to the stereo system, shutting the music off, and then faced me once more.

He crossed his thick, bulging arms across his wide chest and leaned against the wall, taking on an easygoing stance.

“You know what it does to me to see you in your little ballerina outfits?”

My heart raced faster and my pussy became wetter. I wanted him and, by the look on his face and the very prominent erection tenting the front of his workout shorts, Kostya was all about wanting me too.

I knew exactly what these outfits did to him. Couldn’t say I was exactly sorry about it either.

I pushed off the doorframe and took a step into the gym, although it kind of felt like I was walking into the lion’s den.

“I know,” I whispered and took another step forward. “Also, when are you going to stop following me to and from work, or having some lackey doing it?” I felt like changing the subject might take that feral look off Kostya’s face—then again, maybe I didn’t want it gone.

Because when he lost control, it was one of the most instantly attractive things I’d ever witnessed.

He smirked but it was anything but humorous. It seemed such a sadistic act, one that made my pussy soaked.

“You wanted to work in the city and I was all about giving you your independence, sweetheart, even if it went against every protective instinct in me to let you spread your wings.” He pushed away from the wall and came closer. “But if you think for one minute I’d ever let you be unguarded…” He slowly shook his head. “So if I can’t be there watching you, I sure as fuck am gonna make sure there’s eyes on you to report back to me so I can make sure you’re safe.”

I slowly licked my lips.

“Not that I want anyone but myself watching your pretty ass…” He came closer and I found myself moving one back.

He stalked me like a predator. I was his prey.

We did this dance until my back met the wall, and Kostya was towering over me. I tipped my head back to look into his face.

“I want to tear this flimsy—but sexy as fuck—outfit off you.” He slammed a palm on the cinder block beside my head and leaned in. “I want

to just look at you all soft and pink and perfect."

He slammed his left palm on the other side of my head and leaned in closer. His lips were barely touching mine now. I wanted him to kiss me and moaned, but he pulled back when I leaned forward, stopping our mouths from fully pressing together.

He retreated back, flicking his gaze up and down my body.

"How badly do you want me to fuck you, sweetheart?"

Could he see—hear—how fast my heart was beating?

"Yeah," he groaned. "Yeah, you want me to fuck you really badly, don't you?" He ran his thumb over his bottom lip. "You want me to make that tight little pussy sore?"

I couldn't hold my moan in, and he smirked all arrogant-like.

"I'll only give you one choice right now. But only one."

Oh, he was playing dirty tonight.

"You can either take off the prima ballerina outfit, or ask me like a good girl to tear it off of you before I fuck you."

"You—" I didn't even get the words out before he was ripping the clothes off me as easily as if they were tissue paper.

And when I stood before him naked, when he pressed his body to mine and I felt the huge length of his dick grinding against my belly, I couldn't stop myself from biting his bottom lip and then dragging my tongue over the flesh.

Before I knew it, Kostya had me on my back, the cold blue mat beneath me only cooling my body for a second before it got all slippery and wet from our sweaty bodies.

There was no preamble, no working me over and getting me ready. I was already there. I was already primed and ready as he spread my legs, curled his fingers into my inner thighs painfully, and slammed his cock into me so hard that my back slid up the mat.

I had to reach up and over my head to brace my hand on the wall to stop myself from moving anymore.

I closed my eyes.

He made a low and harsh sound. "No, sweetheart. Eyes on me." A second later, his hand came down and he slapped the top of my pussy, grazing my clit.

I screamed out and snapped my eyes open; that pain and pleasure brought me closer to orgasm already.

“Yeah. You like it when I fuck you like I’m just using you, isn’t that right?” He bottomed out, grinding himself against my clit until I mewled for more.

The sex was hot and rough, dirty and sweaty. Beads of his perspiration fell onto my belly, breasts, and neck. And when he reached out and started rubbing those drops into my skin, branding me in that primal way he did, I moaned and silently begged him to fuck me harder.

“My good fucking girl,” he murmured, his focus on my mouth, his lips parted as he panted.

And then his hand was curled around my jaw, adding pressure until I opened for him.

“Fucking wider, baby,” he growled and I readily obeyed.

He leaned in, his gaze trained right on mine, and then he was slowly letting a trail of saliva fall from his tongue and drip into my mouth. Kostya pulled back and stared at what he’d just put in me, groaned, and let another long, thick trail of saliva fall onto my lips.

It was so fucking nasty and hot, and I opened my mouth wider, letting more of his spit drop into me as his thrusts became more frantic.

He slammed his mouth on mine, pushing his tongue past the seam and fucking me there too.

He tunneled his cock in and out of me and thrust his tongue between my lips before retreating. He did this in tandem with what he did between my thighs, over and over again, his sweat dripping on me, his teeth biting.

I was lost in the sensations as I wrapped my arms around him, dug my nails into his back, dragging them across his shoulder blades. He hissed against my lips before pulling back. The air sawed in and out of him as he panted.

His eyes looked darker, his pupils blown. He looked so vicious right now, primordial in his need for me.

“Look at you,” he snarled and slammed especially hard into me, a cry of pain and pleasure spilling from my throat. “You’re a fucking mess, baby. Covered in my sweat, my spit.”

His cheeks were all flushed, his lips swollen and red. He leaned back and slid his hands down my waist, over the tops of my thighs, and then curled his fingers behind my knees. He pushed my legs open and back so they pressed to my chest, spreading me open even wider.

He stared at where we were connected, watching as he savagely claimed me.

“This pussy is all swollen and red, stretched so wide around my dick. I bet it hurts, doesn’t it, sweetheart?”

I gasped and nodded, unable to speak or even think coherently.

“I’d cover you with my cum because I fucking love seeing you marked like a dirty girl and smelling like me.” He looked up from between my legs and into my eyes, his fingers going to my clit. “But I want to fill you up, want to pull out and watch it slip out of this little cunt because it brings me a nasty kind of satisfaction.” He slapped my clit again. “Give me what I want, darling. Make me happy and come.”

I tipped my head back, closed my eyes, and cried out as the pleasure crashed through me so powerfully I felt like I was seizing.

I was vaguely aware of Kostya making animalistic sounds, felt him pulling and tweaking my clit, and those tendrils of pleasure grew until I was never going to find sanity again.

I could feel his cock jerk inside of me, swore I could feel the thick, hot, and milky jets of his cum filling me so powerfully I felt full from it.

He collapsed over me, his head resting on my shoulder, our breathing identical as we gasped for air. I didn’t know how long we lay there, but when he pulled out of me I groaned in disappointment.

“Look at that.”

I forced my eyes open to see him staring at my pussy.

A second later, I felt his cum start to slip out of me and that harsh sound that left him had my nipples beading all over again.

He smoothed his fingers over my lips and clit, down my slit, and over my entrance. And when he pushed his finger back into me, my back arched.

“I belong here.” He thrust those digits in and out of me until I gasped and started grinding myself against his hand. “We’re not gonna waste a drop, sweetheart.” He pulled out of me then wiped his fingers over my belly, smearing his cum and my pussy juices all over my skin.

I was ready for round two, but when a serious expression morphed Kostya’s face, the heat in me subsided.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know if I’m ever capable of love,” he said after a few minutes of us just catching our breath. He rose up and stared down at me. “But whatever good and pure thing I’m capable of feeling… it’s yours. *I’m*

yours.” His voice caught slightly on the last word. “You’re the only thing I care about, Ana. I’ll gladly kill for you, would die for you. You sure as fuck deserve someone who isn’t as dark and fucked up as I am…”

He cupped my cheek and ran his thumb over my mouth, tracing my lips.

“But I’ll never let you go. I’m too selfish and you’re mine.” His voice was pitched lower. “I want it all with you, Anastasia. I want forever, and I’ll make that happen, because I’m that much of a bastard.”

“Kostya.” I murmured his name. “I love you.”

He leaned in and kissed me slowly. Soft. “You’re branded in my cold, black heart.” He kissed me again, little pecks that went against all the villainous sides of what made him… *him.*

“Tell me again,” I whispered, my legs and arms wrapped around his body as I held him as tightly as he did me.

“You’re mine.” He pulled back and stared into my eyes. “And then the devil got his happily ever after.”

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CHAPTER

THIRTY

Dmitry

Five years later

I’d been writing to her for five years, stuck behind metal and wired glass, a prisoner in the Desolation Correctional Facility.

I told myself I was too old for Claudia, the younger sister of my brother’s wife. I tried convincing myself I could be a good man because I knew she was too innocent and vulnerable for the likes of me.

I was a toxic motherfucker for her.

I stared at the roll of loose-leaf papers held together with a rubber band, a cheap plastic pen shoved between them. I tightened my fingers around them until I heard them crinkle.

Little bird.

That was what I’d called her in the letters, a fragile thing that was far too breakable but I wanted to hold it even though I knew I’d crush it regardless.

The letters had started five years prior.

I’d ignored them at first because what the fuck was I supposed to talk about with a then-fifteen year old?

I didn’t even know why she’d taken an interest in me, and the times I talked to my brother Nikolai, since he was married to Claudia’s sister, my brother hadn’t known anything about it.

I’d told him to shut that shit down and make his sister-in-law see that she was being stupid for talking and trying to connect with a damn convict.

But clearly Claudia didn’t care because the letters kept coming.

Finally I'd gotten so pissed that I'd written her back, telling her to get a life, that her writing me was fucking dumb, and I wanted nothing to do with her.

Tough love was the only kind I knew, so I gave it to her tenfold, hoping she was smart enough to learn her lesson and leave me be.

She hadn't. She kept writing, which pissed me off all over again.

I wasn't a good person and I never claimed to be. Hell, I didn't want to be.

I got to the point where she'd worn me down to where I couldn't think of anything but her.

I started writing her back, still being an asshole and telling her to wise up and leave me alone. But the truth was I enjoyed talking to her. I looked forward to the letters because it made this hole in hell I was currently in more bearable.

It wasn't until she started sending me pictures after her eighteenth birthday that I felt something changing inside of me. She'd turned into the hottest fucking piece of ass I'd ever see.

Big tits, angel-like face with those full red lips and big blue eyes. And her silky long black hair had me picturing my hand wrapped around the strands as I guided her head back and forth, stuffing her mouth full of my cock.

I realized I fucking wanted her. And that desire for her only grew the more letters we exchanged, and the more pictures of her she sent that I shamelessly jerked off to in the middle of the night.

Fuck, I jerked off to the thought of Claudia so damn much. I pictured my face buried between her thighs as I ate her pussy out, or I'd picture coming all over her cunt and stomach and then rubbing it in, marking her.

I was such a sick motherfucker, but I had no desire to change.

Wanting her was a mistake. But one I wanted to make regardless.

I heard the buzzer go off and stopped at the steel and glass, bolts and wire, that stood between me and freedom.

Five long fucking years I'd been behind bars for a crime I didn't commit, but one they'd used to get me locked away so they could slap me with a shitload of other bullshit they'd been building against me.

Five fucking years that my lawyer had been working on getting my sentence reduced and getting me the fuck out.

And far too long having a hard-on for a woman I had no business talking to, let alone wanting to get inside of in the most obscene of ways.

I was anxious for my freedom, not only because I wanted it, but because I wanted to find her and make her mine, even if it was just for one night. Even if it was me fucking her until she was filled and covered in my cum and would forever smell like me even after I left.

When her letters had stopped six months ago, I'd had no outlet to extinguish my frustration aside from beating the shit out of any poor bastard who crossed me.

And even that was risky seeing as I had to stay on my best behavior if I had any hope of being paroled.

That certainly hadn't been when my possessiveness for Claudia had started, but her freezing me out had been the accelerant to it.

Now it was this fucking beast inside of me that demanded a hell of a lot more than she could ever handle.

The heavy metal door opened and I walked through, the fresh air assaulting me. I inhaled deeply, taking it into my lungs and feeling a dark tendril move through me. I knew what this was and I embraced it.

I didn't know when my obsession had started, but fuck me, it was a living, breathing demon inside of me that I couldn't shake.

I was a hunter. She was my prey.

Fuck, this was gonna be good, especially when I made her realize she was mine.

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